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HAZEL HENDERSON is also among speakers at 1991 Dartington Conference on TRANSFORMATION (April 3 – 7). Participants include NICHOLAS ALBERY, SARA PARKIN, JOHN ALDERSON, SIR ANTHONY PARSONS.

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New Internationalist exists to report on the issues of world poverty and inequality; to focus attention on the unjust relationship between the powerful and powerless in both rich and poor nations; to debate and campaign for the radical changes necessary within and between those nations if the basic material and spiritual needs of all are to be met; and to bring to life the people, the ideas and the action in the fight for world development.

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How presumptuous is it of me, I wonder, to write an entire magazine based on my experiences travelling through a country and then expect you to read it? Why should you be interested in one person's view?

It's true I could have constructed a magazine on Vietnam easily enough in a more conventional way: commissioning, say, one article on the economy, one on ecology and another on women, and then weighing in with an editorial of my own that tried to pull them together. But would anyone bar those with an already keen interest in Vietnam have read such an issue? I doubt it.

This is a problem we're trying to come to terms with at the moment. We believe the **NI** should focus on particular countries once or twice each year; that every once in a while we should offer our readers the chance to get to know a place in more depth than our *Country Profile* section could ever afford. We also believe we shouldn't choose those countries accord-

ing to conventional news criteria; we shouldn't mimic the journalistic troubleshooters who only fly into a place when something awful happens that will look good on TV. If CBS TV hasn't found anything worth reporting on for years in, say, Zaire, that's all the more reason why the **NI** should be in there unearthing the many wonderful or terrible stories waiting to be told.

The trouble is, recent readers' polls have suggested that **NI** issues focussing on single countries are less popular and less read than our more normal theme magazines – unless, as with *Palestine/Israel* last year or *South Africa* a few years back, they happen to be in the news. This is understandable enough: in a busy world which bombards you with information all the time, it is hard to raise enough interest to read a whole magazine about a country with which you have no point of reference and are never likely to visit.

The theory behind this issue is that if we introduce such a country through the travels and travails of an editor abroad then it will have more chance of catching your interest – perhaps because you will then be seeing the place through the eyes of someone who is encountering it for the first time, and who notices the things that

you might if you were there too.

Of course the weakness in this theory is that the reader has to be interested in the observations and idiosyncrasies of the writer – and by pushing myself to the fore I may well end up alienating more readers than I win over.

I must admit the theory was bound to appeal to me because it enabled me to write about Vietnam in the way I wanted anyway. I enjoyed the travel itself, of course. In the days when I used to travel in Asia for pleasure and 'enlightenment' instead of for my job I would have given my right arm for the privileges of a journalist (an interpreter at your elbow, access to information and 'important' people). I've relished the challenge of writing a whole magazine, too. I've enjoyed trying to entertain while at the same time introducing the dreams and dilemmas of a country the world once loved to hate – but which it has since more or less forgotten.

Chris Brazier

Chris Brazier
for the New Internationalist Co-operative

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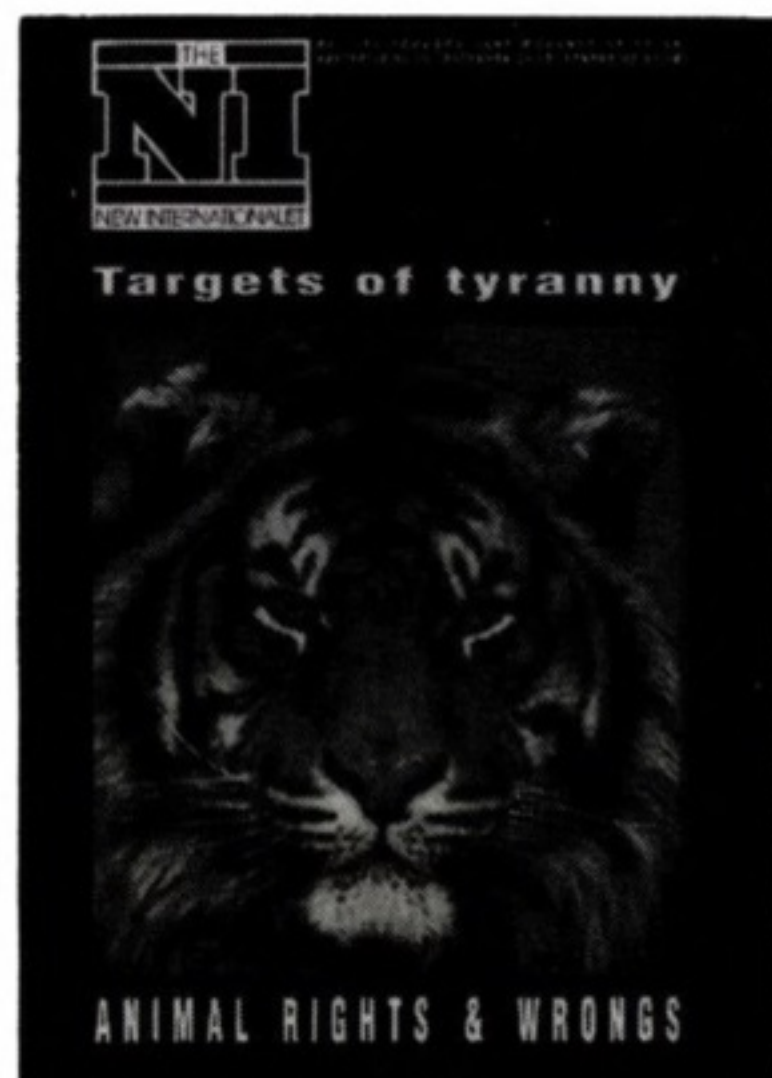
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The wrongs of rights

I opened your January issue (*Targets of Tyranny*, NI 215) imagining you would debate the subject of whether or not animals have rights. But did you grasp the nettle and argue the case? No. I suspect



because you knew there was no case to argue. There is no such thing as basic or inherent 'rights' – not for humans or animals. Rights are something that people create, fight for and try to get accepted by society at large. Any other belief in 'rights' is a religious or spiritual one. If you believe that 'animal rights' exist – and the term was used throughout the magazine – then either you argue the case or admit that your belief is religious. Skirting the issue is simply not good enough.

Liz Dawkins
Sheffield, UK

Retrieving baby

Unable to respond to Amorey Gethin (*Endpiece* NI 214) with a few well chosen shrugs and grunts or a mental reservation telepathically transmitted, may I use the blurred medium of writing to say that he should mind the baby as he empties the bath-water. Of course language is an inaccurate vehicle for thought and a far-from-perfect means of communication. But this doesn't make it malignant, a disease, as he says. Diseases are by definition harmful to the life of the organism. And language enables individuals to unite (as well as separate) groups to co-operate (as well as fight), civilizations to

NI welcomes your letters. But please keep them short. They may be edited for purposes of space or clarity. Include a home telephone number if possible and send your letters to the nearest editorial office. The address is inside the front cover.

develop, the past to be preserved, the future to be faced up to... I think Amorey Gethin has fallen into the trap of blaming the human condition on one big idea: language. I could make a similar case for religion, ideology, technology, instinct. They all cover a multitude of sins – and virtues.

David Gill
Oxford, UK

Pro-Nazi president

I too am revolted by the sycophantic adulation given to our royalty (*Letters* 214), but I confess I sometimes prefer a monarch to a state president. Take South Africa. I was horrified to discover that the politician appointed as its first state president had been interned for supporting his country's enemies in both world wars, and a successor had also been interned for heading a pro-Nazi 'SS' style terrorist group in South Africa during World War Two. Compared with this, our Liz's frock-coated brigade of boot-lickers are the embodiment of nobility.

L Clarke,
Uxbridge, UK

Starless treatment

The country profile on Jamaica by Tony Thorndike (NI 213), was as interesting and informative as ever. But I was surprised to find that the 'At a Glance' panels gave Jamaica five stars out of five

for its 'Widespread respect for Human and Civil Rights'.

Jamaica retains the death penalty. And Amnesty International's 1989 report lists numerous cases of inadequate trial procedures, unsound convictions, unacceptable treatment of prisoners and over 200 prisoners on death row. The Jamaican final appeal committee has annulled 10 death sentences due to errors in the trials. This is hardly a spotless record. I have taken my tippex to three of the stars and feel that other readers might wish to do likewise.

Mervyn Carter
Milton Keynes, UK

Critical eye

Jim Heber (*Letters* NI 213) asks us not to 'emasculate' the Bible, but consider the following excerpts from the New English Bible: First, 'You should not wrong an alien or be hard upon him; you were yourselves aliens in Egypt.' This is a noble precept. If we all lived by it the world would be transformed for the better. Second, 'You shall not allow two different kinds of beasts to mate together. You shall not plant your field with two kinds of seed...' This is merely harmless poppycock – ask any farmer. Third, 'You shall not allow a witch to live.' This is not merely poppycock. Its application led to horrible suffering on the part of many

innocent women and children over many centuries. I cannot reject the whole Bible because of statements like the first. But I cannot accept it all because of the other two statements. I have to sift it critically – to emasculate it if you like. The glib alternative – to make it mean what I want – is intellectual dishonesty.

Eric Stockton,
Sanday, Orkney, UK

Revolted reader

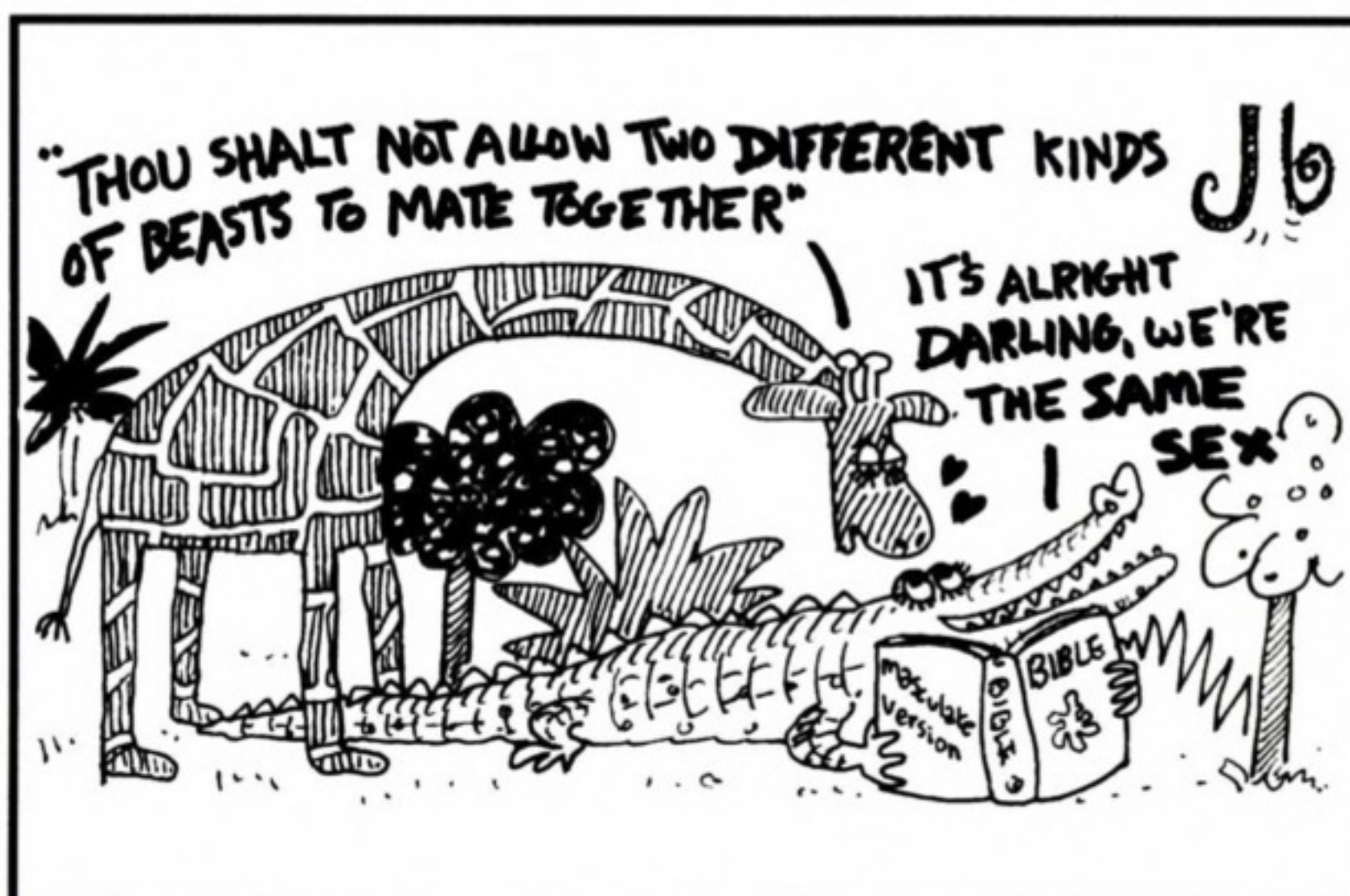
Your October issue *The Secret Life of the Apple* (NI 212) filled me with distaste and even revulsion. Page after page poured out effusions of indignation of the most revolting kind, selectively gathered – not only from all over the world but from a prurient exploration of mediaeval and ancient writings. Your title 'Why men hate women' implies a universal assertion which most normal people, men or women, would react against as misleading or untrue. I suggest your 'psychologist' who wrote it is projecting her own hurts, confusion and animus onto men with a blind intensity that mirrors the obscenities and mistakes of men which she selects to quote. She is actively undermining the long-established structures of family loyalty, respect and trust.

David P Smyly
Bedford, UK

False consciousness

I was surprised that you printed Celia Kitzinger's disappointing and depressing article 'Why men hate women' (NI 212). It did not get to grips with the real issue at all. The fragile masculinity that men have to struggle with is a false masculinity imposed on them from babyhood by a society that teaches boys to be competitive and aggressive. When the qualities of gentleness are truly valued in men as much as they are in women, and when all children are encouraged to develop their total personalities regardless of sex, this struggle will become meaningless.

Judith Reed
Stockton-on-Tees, UK



Given the pip

Frankly, Apple Day ranks bottom of my list of significant events for the year. I am more interested in an apple for the teacher (my job), by which I mean that nowadays it is difficult to find time for teaching let alone discussing secondarily-derived trivia about apples.

J S Nightingale
Broadstairs, UK

Broad strokes

We looked forward to the August issue on *Fundamentalism* (NI 210) with considerable interest. To say we were disappointed would be an understatement. Instead of dealing honestly with the issue, you seemed determined to undermine all religious consciousness.

Why, for example, is it

difficult for Chris Brazier to understand that world hunger is caused not by God's inaction but by humankind's? It is our own determination to live selfishly rather than follow God's directive to love our neighbour as ourselves that has created painfully unfair global food distribution. In your zeal to whitewash fundamentalism, you have broadened your brush to include all of Christianity.

Dave and Aileen Arnold
Iqaluit, Canada

Forgotten democracy

Thank you for your September issue *East meets West, North forgets South* (NI 211). The 'action replay' article highlighted events that changed the political shape of the world. But I was

amazed in the entry for April 1990 that you didn't mention the introduction of multi-party democracy in Nepal. This was finally granted by the King after a long campaign by opposition groups which finally united to achieve their ends, urged on by publicity and media coverage of events in Eastern Europe which raised awareness of 'people power'. The previous one-party system and its record of human rights will hopefully now be improved on.

J Schofield
Pokhara, Nepal

Rough justice

The use of chemical weapons is absolutely forbidden under international law. Yet little was done about Saddam's repeated use of chemical weapons against Iran after

1983. When that war ground to a halt in July 1988, Saddam used chemical weapons against Kurdish villages on August 25. Next day, the UK persuaded the UN Security Council to pass resolution 620 condemning the use of chemical weapons and calling for 'appropriate and effective measures' if the weapons were used again. They were – two days later. And again in September and October 1988. Had the Security Council responded to these outrages in line with Resolution 620 Saddam would hardly have dared invade Kuwait.

Hugh Dowson
Bath, UK



The views expressed on the letters pages are not necessarily those of the NI.

LETTER FROM TAMIL NADU



People and other pests

Visitors to the native people's project run by Mari Marcel Thekaekara and her husband, belong to two categories – those delightful to have around, and the pain-in-the-anatomy variety. Mari Marcel sorts out the wheat from the chaff.

In recent years, tribal people have become a 'fashionable' group to work with in development circles. And in the Nilgiris, South India, our physical remoteness from the rest of the country makes us especially attractive to a wide range of visitors.

Before we were married, Stan and I belonged to an internationally affiliated Catholic student group. Our homes were open to students from all over the world and this gave us the opportunity for cross-cultural exchanges which have influenced us ever since. Our closest friends came from different continents. And early in our marriage we decided to keep our house open for young people in search of different options. After a while however the parade of visitors has begun to seem too much even for us.

Some visitors have a genuine interest in development and tribal people: they are concerned, sympathetic and sensitive. These people we welcome for their intelligent exchange of ideas, for we have neither the time nor the inclination for normal socializing.

Other visitors are of a different kind. They come in all nationalities, shapes and sexes. Instantly recognizable. Obviously obnoxious. Self-termed charity supporters, they generally arrive unannounced, apologizing profusely on behalf of the Indian postal system for the telegram which didn't arrive. This group believes in project-hopping, which is a useful way to see the Third World at someone else's expense. Hospitality is an Indian tradition. And rarely does anyone mind hosting people. It is considered part of life. But people do mind being unfairly used.

Conversely, I have been embarrassed at 'radical activists' (Third Worlders) unashamedly leeching off Western friends in Europe and the US. The Westerners have guilt complexes about our suffering masses, and unquestioning admiration for the activists working towards revolution. So where they would have kicked a fellow country-person in the pants, they acquiesce abjectly to the most unreasonable demands.

Anthropologists of course, descend on us in hordes. The majority regard the tribals as interesting subjects, not people. They arrive armed with paper and pens, research paraphernalia and not an iota of sensitivity or human concern for the people. They charge into their subjects' homes obsessed with their questionnaires, oblivious to people's objections and with no respect for their privacy. 'Would you allow these people to invade your home and ask you what you eat at each meal?' I asked a researcher. I was answered by a blank, uncomprehending stare. 'But I need the information for my thesis,' was his reply.

Recently, an avalanche of anthropology students from neighbouring Kerala University descended on a tribal village. They camped nearby and besieged the poor villagers mercilessly for days on end. Their questionnaires needed embarrassing details of the most intimate kind. One ridiculous young girl questioned an old Moolukurumba woman about the details of her wedding night. Annoyed, the old woman retorted 'Get married and you'll find out'. A younger tribal woman, similarly harassed, retreated embarrassed to her husband. Laughing, he replied 'Send her to me and I'll show her'. The student hastily moved away.

The majority of tribal people however are guileless, defenceless against the thick-skinned academics who come to question them. These academics seem oblivious to the fact that mere friendliness would obtain more authentic research material. Take the British anthropologist who spent a year living with local tribals. She was sensitive and won the people over. Consequently, our exchange with her was fruitful and rewarding. She gave us a number of insights which opened up whole new perspectives we had missed.

We had observed that most of the tribals found it impossible to fit in with the local plantation culture which involved a fixed six-day week, an eight-to-five routine. They opted out of the system even when their children were starving, preferring their freedom to the shackles of permanent plantation jobs. Locals tended to dismiss the tribals as lazy even though tribals tackle some of the most thankless jobs around.

The anthropologist observed the tribal people's work patterns over some months and pointed out that these people were still adhering to their hunter-gatherer traditions. The theory made sense. Suddenly our entire perspective changed. For years we had been puzzling over the tribal four-day week. And suddenly we understood it. This influenced our planning and helped us to accept a way of life that had until then seemed frustratingly unreasonable.

So now, when the going gets rough and we have had a surfeit of free-loaders, alternative tourists or just plain pain-in-the-anatomy types, before declaring a blanket ban on all visitors, we just stop and tell ourselves that this person might just belong to the right category. With this firmly in mind, we pause, breathe deeply. And take a chance. ●



Photo : Abbas / Magnum

A place for lovers and heroes. The pagoda in the middle of Hanoi's Hoan Kiem Lake is considered the spiritual centre of Vietnam.

I'm on a plane somewhere over India, in the usual nervous limbo between the habits of home and the dark adventure of a new country. Except that this time I think I have more cause than usual to be nervous.

I'm headed for Vietnam, which means just two things to the world at large these days. The first is the 'boat people' who risk their lives in flimsy craft on the typhoon-ridden open seas – what on earth are they fleeing from? The second is 'war' – and specifically its war with the US, which has already led Hollywood to characterize Vietnam as a nightmare world where American boys were blasted by faceless Asian jungle-dwellers.

So here I am heading towards the Heart of Darkness of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. I may have done my reading and know Vietnam is not really like that – but that doesn't stop me feeling a mite anxious about the month ahead.

I strike up a conversation with the moustachioed American next to me. I'm normally pretty unsociable in such circumstances but am immediately rewarded this time by one of those coincidences which makes you wonder about Fate. His name is Larry Hahs and he's actually on his way home to Ballarat in Australia, having emigrated there years ago. But when he finds out where I'm going he says Vietnam is a beautiful country. Surprised that he's been there, I ask if he went there as a tourist.

'No, it was the only lottery I ever

A journey to the heart of Vietnam

What is so strange and terrible about Vietnam? Chris Brazier travels in the other direction from the boat people to explore a country that is still shunned by most of the world.

won,' he says enigmatically. I am stumped for a moment, wondering what kind of bizarre US game show would offer a trip to Vietnam as a prize. But it turns out he spent 18 months there as a GI back in 1971-2. And the lottery he won not only allowed him to leave with his life and body intact but also meant that he never actually saw action.

From all those Hollywood films (and much of the serious literature) you would think it was impossible for a young US soldier never to have experienced combat in Vietnam. But according to Larry 'it was more like summer camp than war for a lot of us guys. At the same time I believed in what I was there to do, believed we had a duty to fight Communism. And I still do believe it – I think America lost the War because it didn't fight it properly, didn't

bomb the hell out of Hanoi.'

I point out that the US dropped more bombs on Vietnam than were dropped on the entire planet during World War Two and we have a lively discussion. But in truth Larry is more thoughtful and less gung-ho than those words might make him sound. He is as worried by the Gulf Crisis and the US role in it as I am, for instance. But his views are probably representative of US veterans of the war in Vietnam and they're an illuminating start to my trip. I start to feel that Fate is on my side.

On arrival at Hanoi Fate decides to give me a kick in the teeth just to stop me getting complacent. I am met by the interpreter who is to accompany me throughout my stay. Her name is Binh and she seems like a very pleasant woman. The only problem is that she doesn't speak English. On my visa application I claimed that I spoke French, never dreaming that I'd be taken at my word. But yes, here I am, bouncing along the potholed road towards Hanoi, trying to ask intelligent questions in French about the rural scenes unrolling through the window while I cope with the shock. *Merde*.

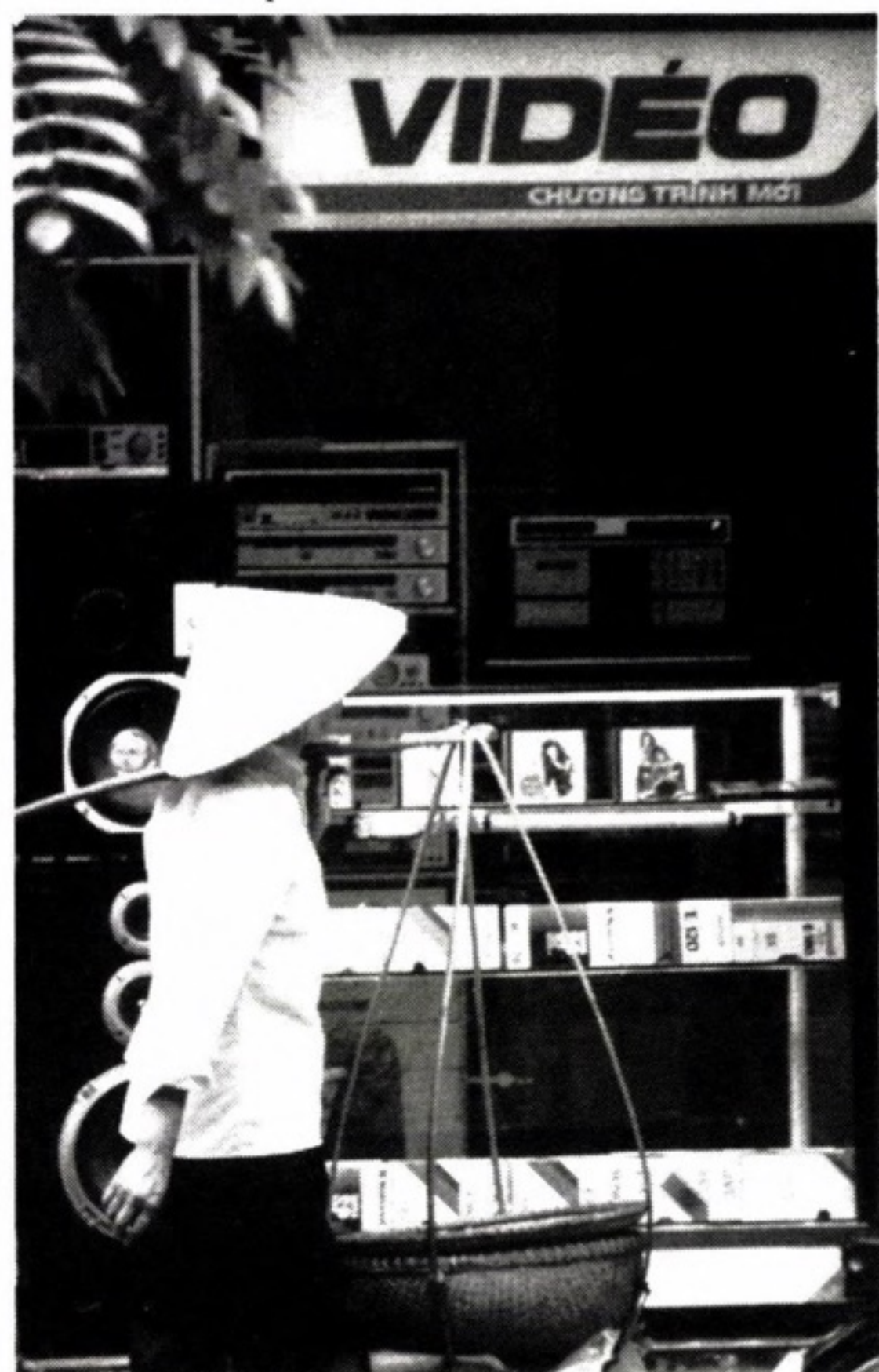
Hanoi itself is a jewel. It doesn't have many grand buildings, the kind of setpiece splendour which Western tourists would pay through the nose to sample. But it has a quiet and friendly elegance all its own. The streets are treelined (the French colonists were brutal but they certainly knew how to plant trees); everything is on a very human, approachable scale. And

Vietnam's enforced isolation from the rest of the world has at least left its capital devoid of the mirror-glass architecture which defaces big cities the world over.

The first chance I get I wander down to Hoan Kiem, the Lake of the Restored Sword. Here, legend has it, a fisherman magically drew a great sword from the lake with which he drove Chinese invaders out of the country – an Oriental parallel to the Excalibur myth. His modern counterparts by the Lake are more interested in my camera and the peaceful invasion of another Asian Great Power. 'Japan?' they ask, pointing to the lens, and nod sagely when I reply in the affirmative.

The interest in Japanese-produced electronic goods is not unique to them. Hanoi was the last place I expected to find sophisticated video equipment but on every street there seems to be another small store piled high with boxes marked JVC or Panasonic. I make a mental note to ensure that I find out how anyone can afford to pay for these given the tiny amount of money they earn.

But the presence of such consumer goods is evidence enough of the changes that are sweeping across Vietnam. Like the Soviet Union, Vietnam has launched into a profound rethink of all its old assumptions about what Communism means and how an economy should be run – its own perestroika is called *doi moi*, or 'new thinking'. If I'd come to Hanoi any time before 1986, I am told by Ben Fawcett, who is Oxfam UK's representative here, I would have seen a caricature of a Communist country. The streets back then were dead and darkened, with a paucity of products in the state shops and a profusion of queues. People tended to wear the same kind of clothes, usually the traditional blue pyjamas of the Vietnamese peasant.



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There is a building boom in Vietnam – and as many women construction workers as men.

Now the streets are seething with activity. There are shops and small traders on every street – the narrow roads north of Hoan Kiem Lake are a riot of colour and bustle. This is a normal enough scene: you will see the same enthusiasm for commerce in almost any Asian town. But it is utterly extraordinary for Hanoi, where such everyday business was banned for over 30 years in the name of socialism.

The theory behind the ban was, of course, that distributing goods by the market was both inefficient and unjust. By planning your economy down to the last detail you could make sure that it served the goals of equality and social justice. But, as in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, something went wrong along the way. Far from being more efficient than the free market, centralized state planning (at least of this kind) proved to be much less efficient. Bureaucrats in distant offices were unable to anticipate what goods people wanted and needed.

By 1986 things had reached crisis proportions. There was a food shortage that verged on famine. The economy was grinding to a halt. So, inspired partly by the advent of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union but more by sheer necessity, the Vietnamese Communist Party endorsed a radical change of direction and embraced capitalist market principles.

In the last year or so we have become accustomed to such earth-shattering changes. But stop for a moment and think how enormous a step this was for Vietnam to take. This was, after all, not a country which had its Communist system imposed on it by a Soviet invader; it was one which had freely opted for it having fought France and then the US for its independence over a period of 30 long years. Choosing to junk the cherished principles which you'd spent most of your life risking all to establish – that's a decision which must have taken no mean

degree of courage.

My first experience of Vietnam's new free market in action comes quickly enough. Round the corner from Hoan Kiem Lake on my first evening I am accosted by a group of traffic police drinking at a modest roadside stall and am soon inveigled into paying an extortionate sum for drinks all round. Not yet having a handle on the local currency I am powerless to do much about this but I decide to sit back and enjoy it – getting ripped off on your first day in a strange country is, after all, a time-honoured tradition.

Mind you, the one officer who speaks English is insistent that the new market mentality is part and parcel of building socialism. 'The Europeans seem to have thrown out socialism but that doesn't mean we should – we have to find our own way.' And he raises his can of Coca-Cola to his lips as if that confirmed his point.

I find my feet and my sense of the local currency (the *dong*) soon enough – and even my French begins to creak into passably effective action. I meet the English-speaking interpreter who would have worked with me had he not been getting married – and I can sympathize with his desire not to spend his wedding night with me in Saigon. Besides, by this point I am happy to continue working with Binh, who seems both professional and helpful.

My time in Hanoi is a whirl of meetings: with aid workers and diplomats, journalists and government officials. I insist on travelling between them on a bike rather than the car that is urged on me by the Ministry of Information. This is not so much out of Green conviction as of a wish to get to see the city as ordinary people do. Hanoi, like the Chinese capital Beijing, is a city of bicycles. And its traffic system is wondrously non-existent: you simply point your bike vaguely in the direction you wish to travel in then weave around the myriad obstacles that appear in your path.

It's a taste I soon acquire – a charming anarchy at the heart of a country that once symbolized Communism. Mind you, if one day the bikes are replaced by cars anarchy will not seem quite so attractive.

Vietnam is still sufficiently Stalinist to keep a tight rein on public information: foreign journalists are not entirely trusted. But I am struck by how open even top Communist Party officials are, how willing they are to accept that Vietnam was going down the wrong track before 1986. I begin to feel I would be hard put to unearth any failing that they hadn't already criticized themselves for.

Take Huu Tho, deputy editor of *Nhan Dan*, the Party's official daily newspaper. He must have been responsible for a phenomenal amount of propaganda in the course of his many years at the paper. Yet listening to his personal assessment of *doi moi* I find it hard to believe I am talking to a faithful Communist.

'You are speaking to someone old enough to have two colours of hair. I have been through slow-moving times and so my assessment may be different from that of the younger generation. But I've changed too. When we liberated Hanoi

from the French in 1954 I had two pairs of trousers and two shirts in a small bag and I thought that was enough. Now I have ten but still think I need more.

'The meaning of socialism has also changed for me. We always used to have a rice shortage every year. But now that we have changed the system and allowed people to produce for themselves we not only have enough to eat but also enough for export as well. I am persuaded that this is the right way for our country to advance from extreme poverty.'

But aren't you worried, I ask, about the gap that's bound to open up between rich and poor?

'Yes I am. But it's not a simple matter. I've just visited a woman, for instance, who owns 52 cows. These produce 300 litres of milk daily and she collects another 300 litres from her neighbours then sells the lot to a factory producing condensed milk. She employs seven labourers on an average wage of 300,000 dong a month (\$60, or three times what ordinary Vietnamese consider a decent living wage).

'In the old days she wouldn't have been allowed to do this because we would have been afraid of her getting rich and



Remnants of old certainties in Lenin Park.

exploiting people. But her work seems to benefit everyone. Why should we oppose her? At this stage in our development we actually need some people to get a little richer who have the art of management.

'If you'd talked to me five years ago I'd have given you the opposite view. But I now think we shouldn't allow our concern for the poor to put obstacles in the way of the rich. In my view the Government should only control the big industries like power and construction. And there is no more time for propaganda.'

But it is five-year-old Hoa who arguably teaches me more than any of my interviews with eminent men. The air-raid siren is sounding, as it disconcertingly does every day in Hanoi to mark lunchtime. Out in the hundred-degree heat this tiny girl comes up to ask me for money. She's wearing a dishevelled, torn T-shirt with a US\$50 bill plastered on the front. Given Vietnam's history this seems, to say the least, deeply ironic.

Hoa tells me both her parents are dead. She has travelled to Hanoi with her grandmother to beg because there is not enough food in her home village in Nghe Tinh, Vietnam's poorest province and birthplace of its greatest leader, Ho Chi Minh. She is not playing for my sympathy – her face is dirty but also defiant. I give her some money and then ask if I can take a photo of her. She runs away.

Reasoning that I might have frightened her I get Binh to give chase with the camera and offer a little more money in return for a picture. Hoa manages to get the extra money and still run off unphotographed. This is one sharp five year old. I applaud her ingenuity, not to mention her suspicion of the Western media. And I drift off into the sentimental notion that one day, 50 years on, I might hear of a President Hoa of Vietnam who, like Ho Chi Minh, came up the hard way.

Do Chi Ngoc

Why do the boat people leave? And when they return to Vietnam are they mistreated? I find Ngoc's home down a decidedly dingy passage. He receives me in the house's only room of any size, furnished with a carved wooden bed, an ancient British radio and a suggestive Hong Kong calendar.

LEFT Vietnam on 24 July 1988. I kept it secret from my family. Some of my friends had said there was a country that was very rich and like paradise – naturally I wanted to go there. I didn't have any special country in mind.

At Quang Ninh I paid for a place in a boat – two and a half million dong (\$500), which was my whole life savings as well as some of my mother's. There were 12 people in the boat in all, including two children and a baby of two months. Yes, I felt terrified but I was so keen to get to this paradise that I felt it was worth the risk.

From there to Hong Kong took a whole month. We were hit by typhoons, which were terrifying – I was sure I was going to die. But you can see a typhoon brewing on the horizon and the skipper knew when we had to race to find an island for shelter.

In Hong Kong the frontier police caught us immediately and we were put in a temporary camp for 28 days. The conditions of life there were very bad: we had to sleep on the ground, weren't given enough food and had no water to wash with. After that I was transferred to Het Linh Chau where I spent a year. Conditions were better there: we had water to wash with

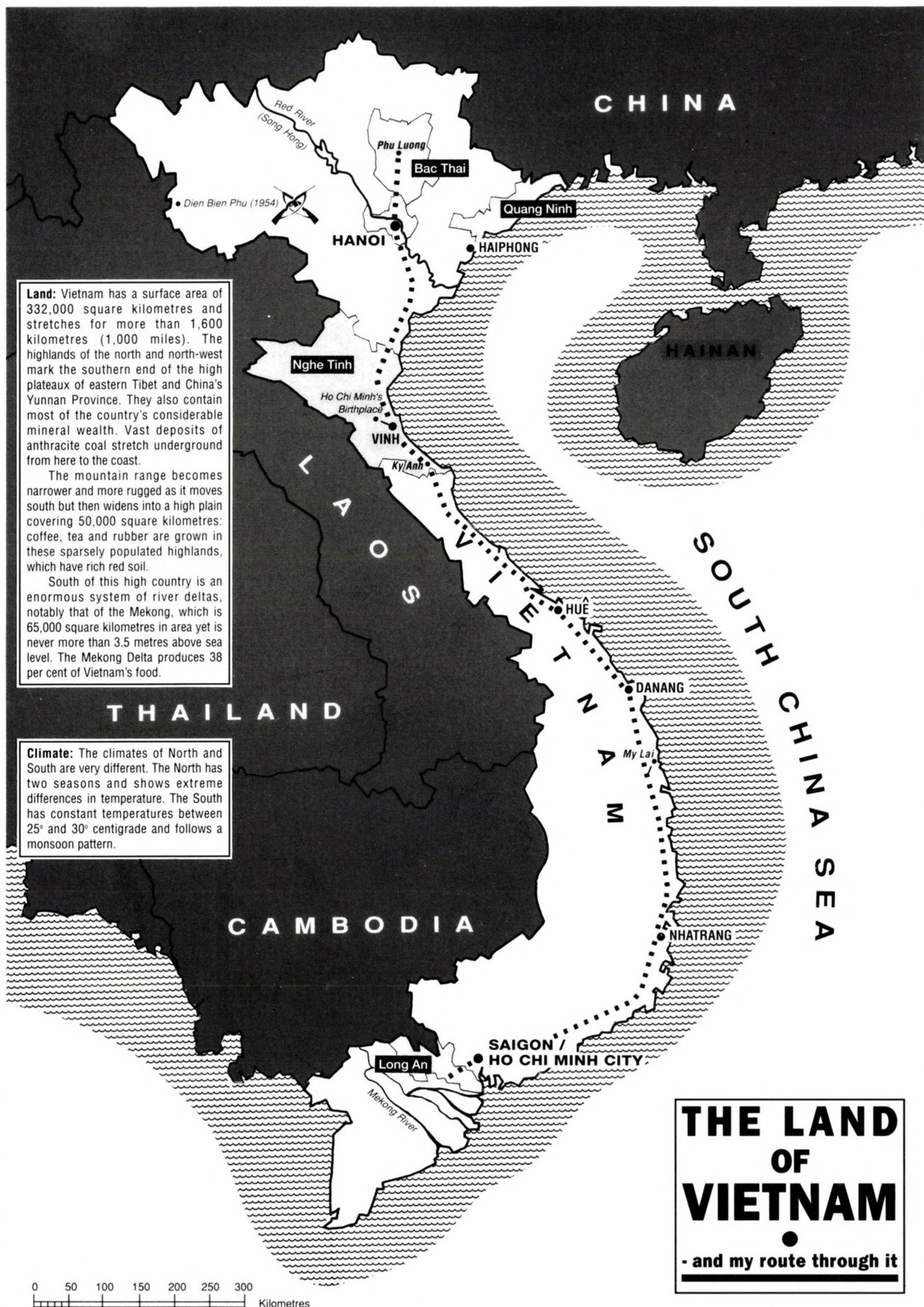
and slept in bunkbeds piled three high in a dormitory of 200 people. There was never anything to do – we just used to sit around playing cards and talking.

In the end I got the news that none of us would be accepted by a rich country: we'd have to stay in the camps. And I heard the Government in Vietnam would take back anyone who returned voluntarily. But it was the letters from my mother that really made up my mind – she said returned refugees weren't in any trouble.

I came back to Vietnam on 31 July 1990. I was happy to come back to my country and see my friends and family. I now work with my little sister on her tea stall. But I'm really just filling in while I wait for the authorities to allocate me some work – they've promised to let me train in television repair but say I'll have to wait.

It was worth trying to reach America or another rich country but I didn't make it. I understand there are so many refugees that rich countries can't accept them all. I don't know if that's fair or not. No, I haven't been mistreated since I got back. And yes, I think people still in the camps should return.







Photos: Chris Brazier

I SIT bolt upright on the wooden board that passes as my bed. It's 5.15 in the morning and still dark yet it sounds like someone has turned on a radio at full blast an inch or two from my ear. I emerge from the half-world inside the mosquito net and peer out of the window to see a loudspeaker suspended from a tree.

My Vietnamese being limited at present to *chào* (hello) and *cámon* (thank you), I am unable to tell whether I am being assailed by a keep-fit course or a lesson in Leninist theory but I'm sure it's very edifying – just a mite loud and intrusive in these country environs. It brings to mind the first time I encountered a loudspeaker in a Communist country – in a remote Tibetan village thousands of miles from the Chinese capital whence the announcement originated. It may have been designed to keep people in touch who couldn't afford radios. But it couldn't help seeming a grotesque intrusion with inescapable shades of Big Brother. And this particular 'Good Morning Vietnam!' doesn't feel very different.

I'm in the rural district of Phu Luong, having driven north out of Hanoi the day before into the hills that separate the Vietnamese plains from China. Hanoi itself lies on one of Vietnam's two great waterways, the Red River, and its flat delta is the ricebowl of the North, as fertile as it is densely populated. It is also staggeringly beautiful, with that luminescent green peculiar to paddy fields set off by the hills on the horizon. Much of the beauty derives from the hundreds of conical-hatted farmers who stoop patiently to their labour. And it feels rather indecent to derive pleasure from the sight of such bloody hard work.

Land in hand

A TRIP TO THE HILLS... BIG BROTHER IN THE TREES... TRIALS OF A VEGETARIAN ABROAD... MOMENTOUS CHANGES... WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?... AN AID WORKER IN ACTION

But the pleasure is there all the same and I rue it when we pass out of the Red River Delta and into the increasingly hilly country of Bac Thai Province. I have cast off my interpreter-minder for a couple of days in the field with Siep Littooy, a Dutch agronomist with CIDSE, the European aid agency which represents UK charities such as Christian Aid and CAFOD here.

Siep has been working in Vietnam for four years and there can be few Westerners who know it so well – apart from his on-the-ground experience in the rural areas, he has a Vietnamese wife and speaks the language. But even for him every step is hedged round with formalities. We have had to seek permission from the Ministry of the Interior to make the trip at all; we have had to report to the provincial headquarters and pick up an official who sits quietly making notes on my conversations; and now we're in Phu Luong we must lunch with someone from its People's Committee before getting to the real business of the day.

Lunch looms as a problem for me, vegetarian as I am. In the city it's generally all right since even though every dish has meat or fish in it I can usually order egg

fried rice (or, if I really want to ring the changes, boiled rice with omelette). This becomes a trifle monotonous but at least it's inoffensive.

The rural areas of the Third World are always more of a problem for a vegetarian, though. In poor areas you clearly have to eat what everyone else does – and all too often they have wheeled out some special meat dish in your honour. Sometimes there is simply no alternative but to close your eyes and swallow hard. Fortunately this time there seems to be enough commotion around the table for me to avoid both meat and discourtesy. I make what I consider an acceptable compromise by dipping my omelette in *nuoc cham*, the salty fish sauce which accompanies every Vietnamese meal.

My main goal here is to talk to ordinary farmers about their lives – and to as many women as possible. But I soon realize that this will be by no means easy. I am courteously received in the houses of two different male farmers, impressive wood-and-thatch structures built on stilts. These are Thy people, from one of the many ethnic minorities in this hilly region. They talk readily about their lives and their views. But it is clear from what they say that they are Party stalwarts, with distinguished military-service records – and the women hang in the background, unwilling to come forward and talk.

I am clearly being 'directed'. Nevertheless I find it curious that men from an ethnic minority (whom you expect to be marginalized or oppressed in some way) should identify so completely with the Vietnamese Communist Party. The second of these men, Hoang Doan Chi, has the gentlest, saddest eyes. When

he looks at me I feel he must be talking from the depths of his soul – even as he trots out the Party line. Above us as we talk are two framed medals alongside photos of Lenin, Marx and Ho Chi Minh – the only decoration in the windowless one-room house. His eyes follow mine.

'You're looking at the medals and certificates? I took part in the resistance against the French and in the American War as well. I served 25 years in the Army before retiring through illness.

'I have always been a Communist, yes. I learned a lot during my service in the Army about the works of Marx and Lenin on philosophy, economics and politics. These seemed very important insights to me.'

I wonder what such a faithful Communist thinks of the momentous changes that have taken place in agriculture under *doi moi*. The year he got married, 1954, was also the year when the Vietnamese won a momentous victory against the French colonial army at Dien Bien Phu and were able to start collectivizing agriculture in the northern half of the country. Villages were grouped into communes which owned the land and distributed food and welfare services – the 300 hamlets in Phu Luong, for example, were grouped into 25 communes. But since 1986 land has been leased back to individual families: they don't formally own it but have complete freedom to cultivate it and sell their produce on the open market.

Mr Chi thinks this is a much better way of doing things but doesn't believe it

undermines Communist principles. 'We believe in the ideas of Nguyen van Linh (the Party Leader) and in the guidance of the Party. The Vietnamese Communist Party will remain true.' But to what?

Back at the District headquarters I end up interviewing Mr Dan, Phu Luong's President. We talk in complete darkness since there is a power cut in this, the northernmost outpost in Vietnam with electricity. It is a profound darkness I have rarely experienced in the West, where we are always so close to cities or street lights: it envelops us so utterly that our voices become disembodied.

Mr Dan is from another ethnic minority, the Zao, yet he seems devoid of pride in his traditional culture. He says he doesn't think it important that traditional Zao language and culture are disappearing and wouldn't mind if his own grandchildren only spoke Vietnamese. His only residual trace of ethnic pride comes when he protests at the habitual assumption that deforestation in the hills – a major problem throughout Vietnam – is caused by minority peoples. He claims it is settlers from the plains who cause most damage, which certainly squares with the situation in other countries.

I tell him that I and the Western aid workers I have met are very worried about what will happen to health and education services under *doi moi*. Whereas before all profits went through the commune now everyone simply pays a standard 10-per cent tax on their harvest. There is a local

levy on top of this which varies from place to place (about eight per cent here) but this is not enough to pay for health and education. There is a clinic in every community, for example, but there are now no funds to pay for medical staff or for necessary drugs.

Mr Dan is unworried – as a government official he would be unlikely to be otherwise. But so too is every other Vietnamese I ask about this in the course of my trip. It is as if they are so enthusiastic about the new system based on individual responsibility that they will not criticize any of its negative side-effects.

Next day I travel to another commune in search of farmers. But this time I insist on speaking to a family headed by a widow – I figure she will be used to talking and acting independently and will also be less likely than a man to be a Party stalwart. The tactic pays off (see box) but, all the same, by the time I meet Siep for lunch at the Commune President's house, I am finding the general male domination in these parts oppressive. Everywhere I go I am received by men alone; I ask how many women are on every People's Committee I meet and of the 12 to 15 members there is never more than one woman and often none at all. And here at lunch 12 men are cooked for and waited on by women. At this point I feel justified in concluding that 40 years of Communism has not exactly made women's liberation a priority.

But we maintain a diplomatic silence – and this indeed seems to be a large part of Siep's job. Watching him at work it's clear that the main qualities a development worker needs are the capacity to listen and endless reserves of patience. His work this morning is a case in point. He's checked the irrigation repairs which CIDSE are paying for and found no progress at all. Instead of venting his natural frustration he has left it to the District Engineer to find out why.

'Always, always, the approach to people is the thing,' he says. 'For example if I ask a farmer here what he knows about irrigation techniques he will say "I know nothing - we are all ignorant peasants here". But if I ask him how he irrigates his plot he will gladly show me what he knows. That listening attitude requires tact and patience because you know you could often cut through it all six times as fast if you just said what to do.'

'What you have to keep uppermost in your mind is that if you rush to intervene it may speed things up in some cases. But you will make mistakes in others through overriding local knowledge or custom, or through leaving local people with less sense of responsibility for the project.'

When I take my leave of Siep he is listening to a lengthy and painstaking report from a local committee. And I'm a little ashamed at how relieved I am not to have to sit through it too. ●

Mai Thi Bic

Madame Bic is a 66-year-old widow. Like most older Vietnamese women her teeth have been blackened since girlhood. Certificates on the wall attest that she lost two sons to the war against the US.

My parents moved to this area because of starvation in their home village. And when I was 19 I got married to a local farmer. I had no schooling at all – I would have liked to learn but we were really too poor for that sort of thing.

You're right, I've had my teeth blackened in the old style. Time was when every girl had to blacken her teeth at the age of 15. I was very willing to have it done. But now we must follow the new custom and make sure girls keep their white teeth – all my daughters do.

I had nine children. Two of my sons volunteered to fight in the American War at 17; both of them were killed. I don't know anything about what happened to them: no-one I know ever heard more than that their sons were dead. Of course I couldn't help hating the Americans. But at the same time I knew we had to fight, that we couldn't allow them to invade our country.

I became a widow in the same year as my sons were killed – my husband died of malaria. At that time my family was poor and we had no money for medicine. Ever since those times I have had to work much harder. Who would have assisted my children if not me? I simply had to go on.

Things have been very different the last four years – we now have our own land to work. And the wind makes my face cool – which is our way of saying things are much better. Before 1986 it was rather difficult not just for me but for all farmers. To speak frankly we didn't have enough food and sometimes had nothing but soup to eat. Now there is more food. It's still not as much as we'd like because here the population is big and the land is small. But we at least now can manage.

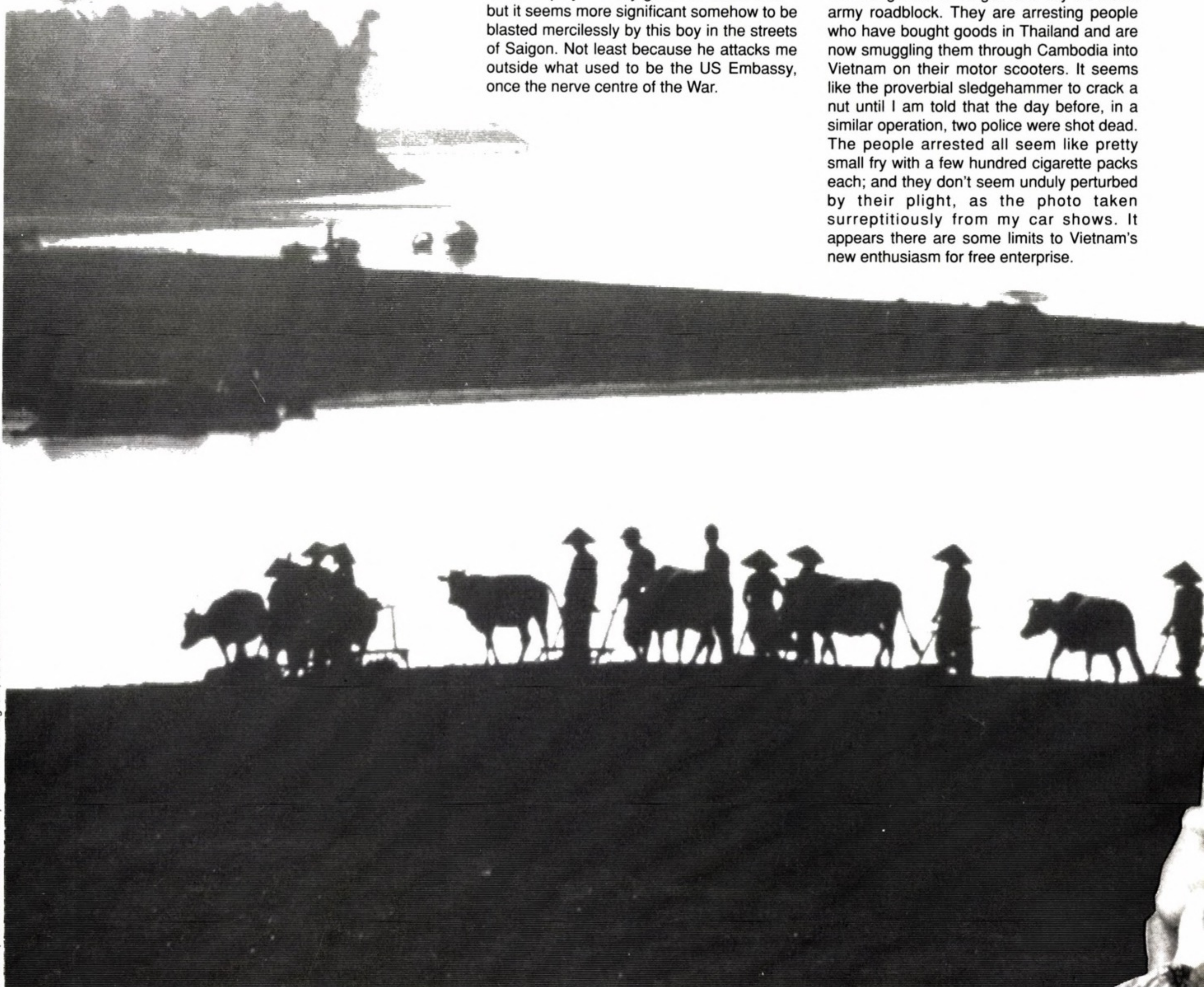
What would I say to people in America? Just that I hope peace will come to all the world and that no-one will have to die like my sons.





Children play with toy guns the world over – but it seems more significant somehow to be blasted mercilessly by this boy in the streets of Saigon. Not least because he attacks me outside what used to be the US Embassy, once the nerve centre of the War.

Travelling back to Saigon one day we hit an army roadblock. They are arresting people who have bought goods in Thailand and are now smuggling them through Cambodia into Vietnam on their motor scooters. It seems like the proverbial sledgehammer to crack a nut until I am told that the day before, in a similar operation, two police were shot dead. The people arrested all seem like pretty small fry with a few hundred cigarette packs each; and they don't seem unduly perturbed by their plight, as the photo taken surreptitiously from my car shows. It appears there are some limits to Vietnam's new enthusiasm for free enterprise.





VIETNAM ANCIENT AND MODERN

The political structures may change but the rhythm of life in the countryside goes on much as it has for thousands of years. Even in the cities – for cycle-rickshaw drivers in Hanoi or young cigarette sellers in Huê – the Communist hostility to petty commerce is already beginning to seem like an historical interlude.



WE'VE hit the long road south which will eventually take us to Saigon and I'm full of optimism, glad to be leaving another round of meetings in Hanoi. I am enraptured again by the routine beauty of the Red River Delta's ricefields. As we move farther south and Vietnam narrows into its slim centre the hills of the Annamese Cordillera gradually sidle up to the road.

These hills are breathtakingly lovely: limestone outcrops that rise sheer out of nothing to a rounded summit. From a distance they interlock and counterpoint in delicate shades of grey and green, the farthest ones threatening to merge with mist or sky. My image of Vietnam had room for little besides warfare and poverty. Yet parts of it are as beautiful as anything I have seen anywhere in the world.

Other parts, it is true, are less naturally endowed and the landscape seems to affect my mood as we move into the poverty of the Central Provinces. Now the hills are barren; the land poor and marshy, often unable to support rice; the houses are of mud and thatch instead of the brick of the Delta. This narrow strip joining north to south is Vietnam's poorest, bleakest heart – the traditional image is of the middle of the peasant's shoulder pole which has none of the bounty of the produce carried at either end (the Red River and Mekong Deltas) but which has to bear their weight.

I pay a visit to Ho Chi Minh's birthplace, a suitably spartan peasant house. Vietnam's first President and the very symbol of its independence, he now transcends politics as a sort of national father-figure referred to by everyone as 'Uncle Ho'. I've been trying to get some sense of whether Ho is held in diminishing respect in these changed times – like Mao Zedong in China. But there is little sign of it: even people highly critical of the Government still have the utmost respect for Ho Chi Minh, saying that his ideas were betrayed by his successors.

Back in Hanoi I'd visited Uncle Ho's mausoleum and museum. The first was closed, his body reputedly being refrozen, but I wandered around the second, an echoing stone cavern of a tribute which Ho himself would surely have disliked. Throughout his life he was unpretentious and ascetic, shunning personal comfort in his dedication to the idea of freeing his people. When he became President he refused to use the palace offered him and lived instead in the modest house in the grounds. He made many mistakes and was prepared at times to be ruthless in pursuit of his objectives. But he was certainly one of the greatest figures of the twentieth century, whom Westerners would do well to know more about (see Page 22).

Arriving in Vinh, the capital of Nghe Tinh province, my spirits sink again. It is renowned as the least attractive city in Vietnam – and I am not inclined to dispute the judgment. Substantially destroyed by

After the typhoon

THE POOREST PART OF VIETNAM... HO CHI MINH'S BIRTHPLACE... RUNNING SCARED OF MOSQUITO HORDES... THE TERRIBLE AFTERMATH OF A NATURAL DISASTER... AND THE LOCAL HERO WHO COPE WITH IT



Good for water buffalo, at least: two weeks after the typhoon, the fields are still flooded.

American bombs during the War, it was rebuilt by the East Germans in the early 1970s and its Stalinist apartment blocks bear witness to that era of 'architecture for the masses' which we can hopefully now consign to the past.

Binh, Tam (our driver) and I have a somewhat gloomy evening meal together. Tam says all he thinks about on such occasions is how much he'd like to be back with his wife and family. Binh says that her four-year-old son was more upset at her leaving this time than he ever has been before; while her husband has been working in East Germany for two years. And I'm thinking of my family too – I've travelled a great deal in my life but this is the first trip I've made since I became the father of two small children, and that makes being away feel entirely different.

Next day we drive the short distance to Ky Anh, a district of Nghe Tinh which is

targeted by Oxfam UK. Voluntary agencies are only now beginning to work in earnest in Vietnam, having just been granted permission to open permanent offices, and they work at present by targeting just two or three needy districts. I read the details of Oxfam's projects in Ky Anh as we head towards it and am a trifle alarmed to read about the need for a special anti-malaria initiative.

Now I am not keen on mosquitoes at the best of times. I am in general loath to take the life of even the tiniest creature on this planet: I regularly rescue drowning insects and will always trap flies or wasps with a glass and set them free outside rather than kill them. But everyone draws the line somewhere and I'm afraid mosquitoes are definitely beyond the pale. Everything in the ecosystem is supposed to have its purpose but what on earth do mosquitoes contribute beyond a deadly disease or three? Faced with their relentless blood-hunger as the alien dark of a tropical night approaches I have often been persuaded that it is them or me and have been transformed into a clinical killer.

Given this phobia it is somewhat disconcerting to read that I am heading for the malarial heart of Vietnam. I read that 50 per cent of cases are of cerebral malaria, which can often be fatal. And when I am shown into the guest room in Ky Anh's district headquarters I notice that the bed has no mosquito net. Ulp. Worse still, when I investigate the Western-style toilet the stagnant water in the bowl is full of tiny wriggling worms and has a host of fully grown mosquitoes sitting on the surface. I shut the lid rather smartly as one prepares for take off and wonder if I can make it through 24 hours without using a toilet. Double ulp.

A mosquito net happily appears later but it is Mr Din who really revives my spirits. He is President of the Ky Anh People's Committee and thus the most powerful man in the district. But you would never know it from his demeanour. He is in his fifties with a shock of white hair and a very gentle manner. He seems like one of those rare people to whom age has brought wisdom. I instinctively trust and like him.

Mr Din takes me on a tour of the area to show me the devastation wrought here by a typhoon just two weeks before. The wind whipped up the level of the sea to the point where it overwhelmed the long dyke protecting the paddy fields. Ironically one of Oxfam's main projects in the district is the rebuilding of this sea wall to a greater height and strength. The typhoon demonstrated the vital need for this reinforcement at the same time as it destroyed much of the work in progress. Near one major breach of the dyke a stone engraved with the word 'Oxfam' lies on the ground, looking uncomfortably like a gravestone.

The flooding of the paddy fields is still visible but the long-term problem is the



Tu, Lan and family - with their new house.

sea salt which has eaten into the soil and will drastically reduce the rice yield for the next few years. Mr Din is concerned that I should understand what a tragedy this is for the people of Ky Anh. He takes me round a school that has been half-demolished by the wind; in a classroom that is still standing, roofless, the lesson from two weeks before is still chalked up on the blackboard.

Finally we visit Ky Ha, a village of salt farmers which has borne the brunt of the storm. Many people's homes have been utterly destroyed - I interview one family in front of the house that they have only just finished rebuilding. A simple two-room structure with a thatched roof, its mud walls are still wet to the touch. Nguyen Van Tu, the 29-year-old father, is inevitably the one to do the talking.

'On the night of the typhoon there was a mighty wind and the sea started to rise with great speed - within half an hour everywhere was flooded. All the animals in the village drowned - there was nothing we could do to save them. Nor could we save any of the things in our house. All we could do when we saw how the sea was rising was to pick up our children and set out into the darkness towards dry land. I had to force my way through water that was up to my neck in places, carrying

both our two boys who were crying madly.'

Having eventually reached dry land, exhausted, Tu and his wife Lan immediately started building a temporary hut in which they could spend the night. Just this one fact puts me in awe of these people's self-reliance and resilience in the face of adversity. Would we in the West be capable of building ourselves a shelter after such a trauma? Hard to imagine, coming as we do from a world where there are emergency services and secure, comfortable buildings in which the stricken can recover.

Despite the subject-matter there is a light, humorous feel to my conversation with this family. This is hardly surprising given that it is being conducted in the middle of an audience of at least 200 people, all pressing round ten deep. Everywhere we have been in Ky Anh we have attracted attention; children have jumped onto the back of Mr Din's jeep, shrieking with glee. But there has been nothing like the media circus we are staging here in Ky Ha.

The waves of people have to be parted as I move on to the 'house' next door. Nothing remains of it except a solitary wooden chest in the middle of what used to be the floor. I try to talk to 68-year-old Hiec, whose house it was, about the night of the typhoon. She tells me that she was saved by her son, who carried her through the floods on his shoulders. But she is understandably too thrown by the situation to say much more.

As I am talking to her something happens which changes the atmosphere completely. A very thin old man with a traditional goatee beard comes up to Mr Din and clings to him, crying piteously. 'Save me, save me please. I'm ill and so hungry.' Mr Din leads him gently away from the crowd, talking to him sympathetically. I have no appetite for any further interviews.

Later Mr Din tells me that the old

man's house has been destroyed and he hasn't the strength to work. Neighbours haven't rallied round to help him, perhaps because their own troubles are too pressing, and he is becoming desperate. Mr Din says that after a visit like that he is so affected that he can't sleep for knowing that these people are his responsibility. I believe him.



Hiec with all that now remains of her home.

I am used to thinking of leaders, even local ones, as oppressors in some way, people liable to abuse their power or benefit materially from their position. But it is as well for me to be reminded that there are local leaders like Mr Din. Formerly a teacher, with his education and ability he could clearly have left the poverty of Nghe Tinh for Hanoi or Saigon and lived a much more comfortable life. Instead he has stayed here working hard to uplift his local community. His home may be substantial by local standards - brick-built and with a timber roof. But it is still bare, with earthen floors and no electricity.

I have made my own tribute to Ho Chi Minh. But it is people like Mr Din who are most worth celebrating - those who all over the world at this very minute are working unselfishly for the development of their local community without hope of recognition or material reward. And I think Ho Chi Minh would have agreed.

When I take my leave of Mr Din the following day I give him some money to distribute to the people of Ky Ha as he thinks fit and I have complete confidence that he will make the right decision about how to use it. By now I have grown used to being more fulsome in my expressions of gratitude and solidarity than I am wont to be - this is the Vietnamese way. But I am not just adapting to local custom when I say that I will carry Ky Anh with me for ever. What I don't tell Mr Din is that I would trust him with my life. ●



Mr Din and Binh above the waterlogged rice fields - as the media circus moves on.



Photos : Chris Brazier

I HAVE just woken up to find that I am going to experience a typhoon for myself: high winds are howling past my hotel window and the rain is teeming down. We travelled down yesterday from Ky Anh to Dong Hoi along Highway One, which follows the coastal plain all the way from Hanoi to Saigon. The road is in appalling condition, like most of the country's infrastructure: denied Western trade and aid, Vietnam has had no chance to rebuild after its decades of war. And in places Highway One is more pot-holes than road.

This makes it impossible to travel at much more than 30 miles a hour at the best of times but in Central Provinces the mounds are even more trouble than the holes. Mounds of grain, that is. At harvest time it is standard practice for farmers to spread their crop over the road so that the husks will be cracked open by the traffic. This is a bizarre gauntlet to run: through lines of people trying to push their grain under the wheels of your car. Sometimes yesterday the piles stretched high and wide right across the road and we were forced to lurch straight up and over it with an almighty thud.

But it is a safe bet that no farmers are going to be requiring our grain-squashing services on a day like this. We need to get moving fast and reach Huê before the typhoon hits its peak.

As we hurtle into the storm I look around for signs of the War, of which I have hitherto seen surprisingly little evidence – some rusting tanks and missiles in Hanoi's Lenin Park and a few bomb craters (now converted into fishponds) in Ky Anh. But we are now approaching the

Adventures in the flood

MY TURN TO EXPERIENCE A TYPHOON... HOW ABBA HELP US CROSS THE SEVENTEENTH PARALLEL... A STORM AND A TEACUP (WITH A DASH OF DICKENS)... HOW TO SAY NO TO PROSTITUTES (POLITELY)... A CANOE THROUGH THE FLOOD

Seventeenth Parallel which divided the country into Communist North and pro-American South between 1954 and 1975: the piles of shrapnel beside the road in this region are legendary.

They may be legendary but they're invisible to me: the storm has reduced visibility to about ten metres and we find ourselves alone on a narrow causeway with the wind and rain thrashing the side of the car. It is, to tell the truth, rather unnerving and Tam, Binh and I start singing to keep our spirits up. They contribute some traditional Vietnamese songs; I throw in *She Who Would Valiant Be 'Gainst All Disaster* and assortments from *The Sound of Music*; then Binh and I duet on a couple of songs by Abba who, strange as it may seem, are Vietnam's all-time favourite Western group and a dominant influence on their own pop music. The other two are particularly keen to sing as they approach the bridge at the Seventeenth Parallel 'because it is such a sad place'. I decide to mark the spot by getting out of the car; but

in five seconds I'm diving back for cover from the deluge.

We are more than a little relieved to reach Huê by lunchtime and find a hotel in which to ride out the typhoon. At first I ask for a room overlooking the famous Perfume River but I soon realize this is a serious error; the storm is attacking the building from the river side and water is sweeping under the doors. We go out to report to the local People's Committee but they are understandably too busy dealing with the typhoon to bother with us: though we do learn that Huê is right at the centre of this typhoon.

It is distinctly dangerous outside. Branches are being blown off trees on every road. But I am unwilling to retreat into the protection of the hotel just yet; I want to find out how an ordinary family is faring. We cross the river by a causeway, already partly submerged, and eventually come across a house that is still offering tea to foolhardy passers-by. The daughter of the house, Mai, is quite ready to talk to us. She says the family used to live by making conical hats but started selling cups of tea when *doi moi* came along. It gives them enough money to get by, she says, but I am doubtful – the house is little more than a shanty shack made of corrugated iron and there aren't exactly many creature comforts on view.

As Mai speaks there are often huge gusts and the sound of something crashing down – she keeps getting up to investigate. And while the howling of the wind is actually more alarming in the hotel, here you really feel you are at the mercy of the storm. Yet Mai continues to sip tea with us and chat. Impressed by her com-

posure, which far exceeds any stiffness in my own British upper lip, I ask how often they experience a typhoon this bad. She says they have one severe onslaught each year but this is the worst since 1985.

Just before we go, Mai's father arrives home. He has one eye askew and glazed over and I feel sorry for him. But then Mai whispers to Binh that he has just taken her mother to hospital for treatment because he beat her up so badly the night before. Apparently he has more than one 'family', though why more than one woman would want him is beyond me: now that I know this about him his eye suddenly seems to mark him out as an evil character out of Dickens and I am glad to to leave without having to shake his hand.

I make one more gesture to experience before retiring into relative comfort: I go out for a walk to a place where I can feel the full onslaught of the typhoon for the first time, unsheltered by buildings. It nearly blows me off my feet and the rain drives so hard that it is impossible to keep my eyes open. But the water is so warm that the onslaught is actually not unpleasurable: like a power shower gone berserk.

Back in the hotel as night draws in and the wind bends the palm trees in half I can't help thinking of the Bogart-Bacall movie *Key Largo*. You know the one: they're trapped in a hotel in the middle of a hurricane with a bunch of gangsters.

And I'm trapped in a hotel in the middle of a typhoon – with a bunch of prostitutes. Now Binh has already warned me about the prostitutes in Huê. She's told me that she once worked with a Swiss journalist who opened the door one night to find a prostitute barging in and taking up residence on his bed. She refused to move unless he had sex with her; he couldn't fetch someone in case she stole something. They sat like that for hours until Binh rescued the hapless man.

I have forgotten her warning and left my door unlocked. Suddenly I too have a prostitute in my room. She is in her mid-twenties and wearing the traditional female silk tunic which is now rarely

seen, the *ao dai*. She says one word twice and I look blank. Seeing how dense I am she tries to make things a touch clearer: she waves two condoms in my face and brazenly pats my crotch. I get her drift. I say 'no' as firmly as I can, sweep her from the room and lock the door. An hour later another woman lays siege to my door, hammering on it and determinedly twisting the doorknob. I call 'no thank you' politely from inside, feeling impossibly English.

Next morning the typhoon has finally subsided – it is still raining but the wind has dropped. In its wake have come the floods: the Perfume River has broken its banks and Huê is flooded on all sides as far as the eye can see. Driving a car is impossible and even on foot the water soon gets up to waist height. So Binh and I hire a canoe. This is not the easiest of boats to travel in – very flimsy, it tilts to the side with the slightest change of balance. There is only one seat: Binh has it while I perch on what turns out to be a US soldier's helmet reclaimed for peaceful purposes.

We glide down street after street of flooded houses – some with their floors just covered; others with water up near the roof. Everywhere I cause great merriment: this is not exactly the mode of transport associated with Western visitors. We heave to beside a couple who have piled themselves, their three children, an aged mother and all their key possessions onto a double bed that is raised above water level (they are shown in the photo on the facing page). Like everyone else I talk to, they are unfazed by the disaster.

'We simply have to wait for the water to go down,' shrugs the father, Hoi. 'How do we live usually? We buy vegetables in the countryside and then sell them in the city market. We'll lose a couple of days' income through this but we won't starve. This is the second time we've been flooded like this – the other time was in the big typhoon of 1985.'

I ask why they don't move to somewhere a bit less vulnerable to such disasters. Not surprisingly, he looks at me like I

am stupid. 'Of course we only wish we could – but you live where you can afford to live and we are poor.' You could get the same response in any Third World country that is prone to natural disasters: in the shanty dwellings built on the edge of the ravine in earthquake-prone Guatemala City, for example. The poor have no choice about where they live and find themselves inevitably in the marginal, dangerous positions that no-one else wants.

We pass on down streets closer to the river, through huge mangrove trees and past families in houseboats who must feel very smug at such moments. We come to a house which is submerged right up to the roof. A man's face is just visible through a window at the top of the sloping corrugated iron. Not the most accessible person to interview, perhaps, but he kindly clambers down the roof to talk to me, leaving his aged father behind. His name, appropriately enough, is Hai, which means 'sea'. This has happened to them three times before but they agree that 1985 was worse – the water then came a good two feet higher, and Hai knows because he has marked the level on his wall. His wife and children have been evacuated to dryer houses but he has to stay here for fear of thieves – though given that their boat and their animals are already gone I can't think that there would be much to steal. They are running out of food and are trying to catch fish.

This wasn't quite what I had in mind when I imagined a boat trip in Huê, the old imperial capital. I conjured myself sitting back in a sampan on the fabled Perfume River, drifting past the citadel of the emperors and reading some of the poetry inspired by the vista. 'Moon rises, moon fades/ My life bound to the boat woven in strands of water... In the current of the Perfume River'.¹

Instead here I am perched on a GI's helmet in the pouring rain asking people stranded by floods what they think of the Communist Party's reforms. Is this what they call serious journalism? I'm half-inclined to think that my main contribution to alleviating these people's plight lies not in telling their story to the world later on but in giving them something to laugh about here and now. I can't help but be struck by people's readiness to share a joke with me, by their amazing good humour in the face of such adversity.

By the time we leave Huê the next day the waters are subsiding and the People's Committee have already gathered an impressive amount of information about the devastation. Over 9,000 houses have been flooded to a depth of between one and two metres and 2,113 houses have been completely destroyed. Fully 524,000 cubic metres of sea dyke have been destroyed in the villages around the city. And six people have been killed. ●



Eye on the storm. Outside the glassless window of Mai's house, the typhoon rages on.

¹ From *Song of the Perfume River* by To Huu (1938).

VIETNAM - THE FACTS

POLITICS



General Secretary: Nguyen Van Linh
Prime Minister: Do Muoi
Foreign Minister: Nguyen Co Thach
Interior Minister: Mai Chi Tho

Only one political party, the Communist Party of Vietnam, is permitted: its General Secretary is the country's leader and its Politburo the country's executive body. The National Assembly does little more than rubber-stamp Party decisions. Nguyen Van Linh came to power in 1986 as a reformer but he is seen as a moderate figure in the current power battle between reformists and conservatives.

PEOPLE

Vietnam's population stood at 64.4 million in 1989, the 13th highest in the world.¹

Most of Vietnam's people are Kinh (those we conventionally think of as Vietnamese) but there are 60 minority ethnic groups, mainly concentrated in the hills of the north and west.

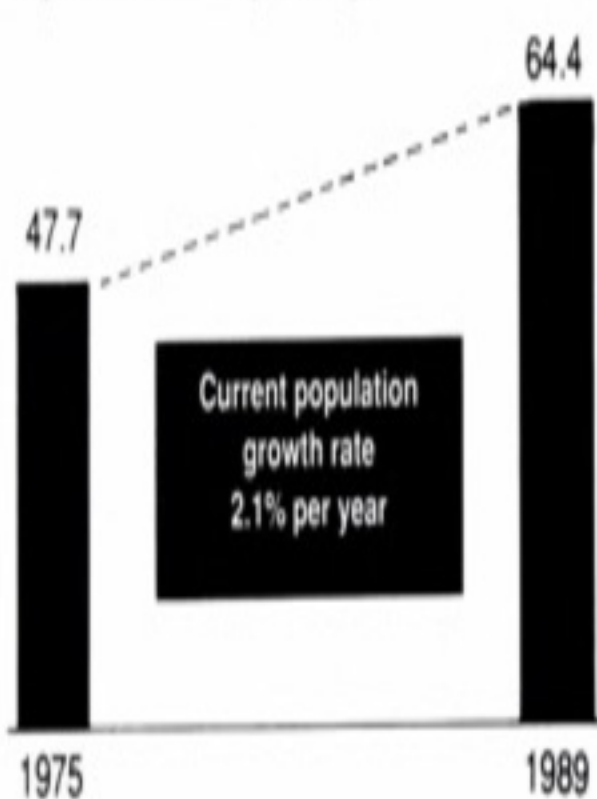
Population density is high at 194 people per square kilometre – still lower than crowded European countries like the Netherlands (357) and the UK (232) but their population growth is negligible.

The Vietnamese Government takes family planning very seriously:

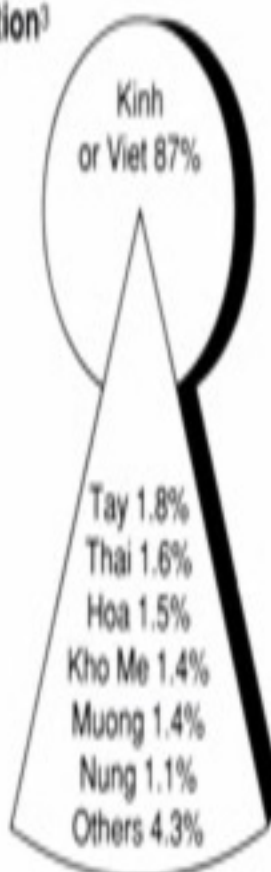
- Parents pay for the delivery of any babies after the second; State employees receive income supplements only for their first two children.
- Condoms are distributed free or at greatly subsidized prices
- A financial incentive of one to five dollars is offered to women having IUDs inserted and to men or women being sterilized.



Population 1975-89 (millions)²



Ethnic composition³



WOMEN

The position of women has improved under Vietnamese Communism – but the reality is far behind the rhetoric.

Unlike Western countries Vietnam has a law (passed in 1986) which states that household chores and care of children are the joint responsibility of a

In both literacy and primary-school attendance women are now almost equal to men – having once been extremely disadvantaged.

Percentage of women and men literate, by age group⁴

Age Group	Women	Men
10-24	93	94
25-34	93	96
35-44	90	96
45-54	79	94
55-64	61	89
Over 65	31	73
Total	84	93

married couple. This is rarely observed in practice.

There is still a serious male-female imbalance due to the number of men killed in the war against the US: 115 women to every 100 men in the 25-44 age-group. The resultant surfeit of unmarried women often suffer a loss of status.

Percentage of women and men who have never attended school, by age group⁵

Age Group	Women	Men
10-24	7	6
25-34	7	4
35-44	11	5
45-54	23	7
55-64	44	13
Over 65	72	32



But the more senior the level, the more disadvantaged women become.

● There are twice as many male college graduates and four times as many qualified male technical workers while only seven per cent of postgraduates are women.

● Of the 44 provincial heads of People's Committees only one is a woman.

● The proportion of women in the National Congress has sunk from one-third 20 years ago to 17 per cent now.⁶



TRADE

Vietnam's exports of \$709 million in 1988 were among the lowest in Asia. Compare its exports per head with other Asian and Western countries:

Exports per head of population (\$, 1988)⁷

Canada	4283
Aotearoa/NZ	2662
United Kingdom	2541
Japan	2159
Australia	1532
South Korea	1445
United States	1280
Thailand	290
China	43
India	18
Bangladesh	11
Vietnam	11

In 1989 the liberalization of trade, together with the devaluation of the currency to realistic levels, produced some immediate results:

● A 100% increase in exports to non-Communist countries.

● Vietnam capitalized on a record paddy harvest and became the world's third largest exporter of rice – after years of having to import food.

● Inflation was reduced from 400% in 1988 to 18.6% by March 1990.

Ironically Vietnam's poverty might help its trade to develop. Its average factory wages of \$10-25 are lower than in any other Asian country except Bangladesh – so its exports would be cheap if only the goods could be produced. The trade most likely to take off is in clothing and footwear, which already sell well in the former Communist bloc.



MONEY

Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in the world. World Bank estimates vary between \$109 and \$200. But even the higher figure would mean Vietnam has only one fifth the income per head of Thailand, which 50 years ago was its equal.²

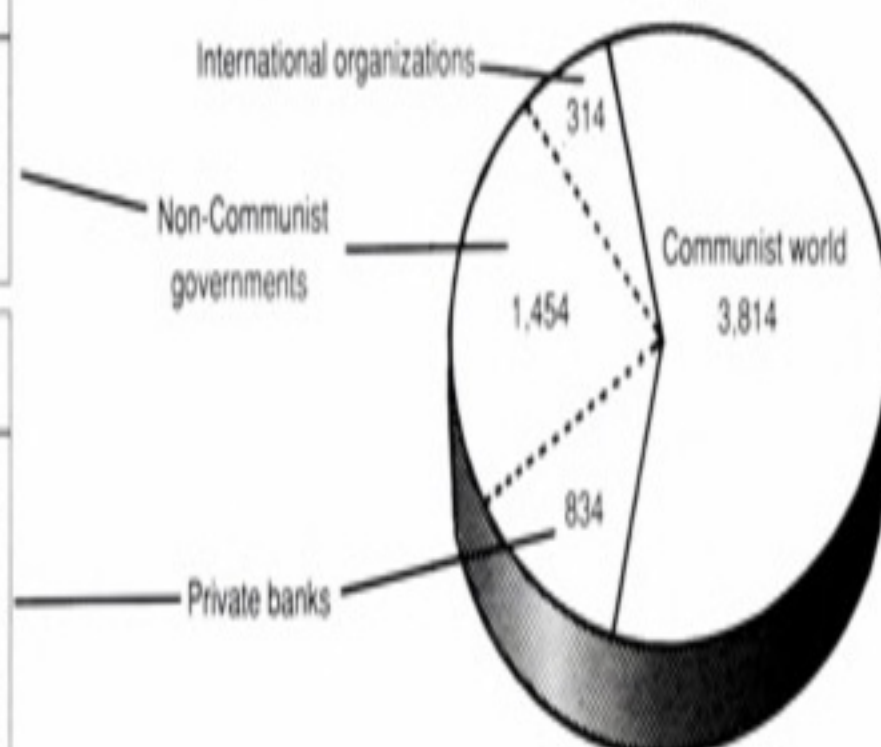
A Western economic boycott since 1979 has denied Vietnam access to new loans. Yet it is still one of the most heavily indebted countries in the world – its overall debt is equal to 100 per cent of its gross domestic product.

Biggest creditors (\$ millions)³

Non-Communist governments	
1. Iraq	347
2. Japan	222
3. Algeria	220
4. France	173

Private banks (by country of origin)	
1. Japan	339
2. Singapore	47
3. India	45
4. Austria	45
5. Italy	42
6. UK	35

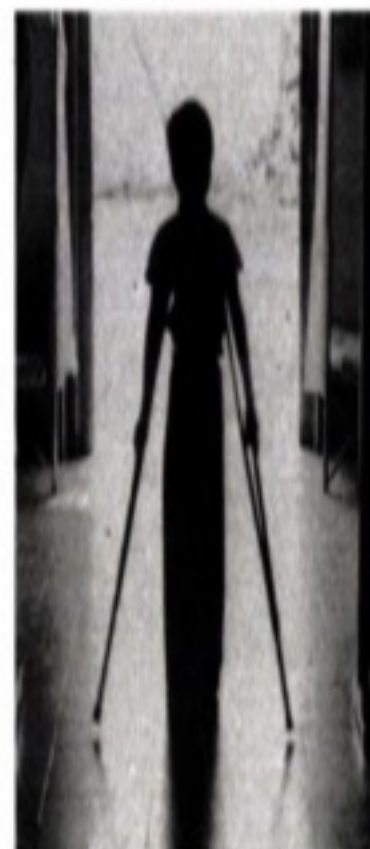
Total debt (\$ millions, 1988): 7,033



HEALTH AND EDUCATION

A key goal of Vietnam's revolution was to improve the health and education of its people. Its achievements have been impressive – but are endangered by the current economic changes.

Vital statistics	Life expectancy (1988)	Under 5 mortality (per '000 births, 1988)	Adult literacy ⁴ (1985)	Income per head ⁵ (1988)
Vietnam's record on life expectancy, child mortality and adult literacy is better than that of some much richer Asian countries.				
China	70	43	69%	330
Vietnam	66	88	82%	109-200
Thailand	65	49	91%	1,000
Indonesia	61	119	74%	440
India	58	149	43%	340



But free health and education have been undermined by the market reforms – the State no longer has the funds to support them.

● Doctors and teachers are now allowed to practise privately in their spare time.

● Local clinics are still free. But consultation fees range from 7 cents at a district hospital to 25 cents at a national one. Treatment fees are extra (an appendectomy costs \$3.40, a baby delivery \$1.30).

● Until 1989 the first 12 years of schooling were free; now only the first 3 years. After that the fee is 15-40 cents a month (tied to the price of rice) and textbooks are sold wherever possible.

● The poor are exempt from fees if they produce a certificate from their local authority. Yet in one district hospital the number of inpatients fell by 50% after the introduction of fees and school attendance is beginning to fall off.⁶

LANGUAGE

Vietnamese, like the Chinese languages and Thai, is a tonal language – but it is easier for Westerners to grasp than other tonal languages because it is written in Latin script. The six tones are indicated by accents, a system invented by a nineteenth-century French priest and popularized by radical nationalists who wanted literacy to be widespread rather than the province only of an educated Confucian elite.

A difference in tone means that the same word can have six different meanings. So:

bao (said flat with no tone and pronounced as 'bough' in English) means 'concentrated'

báo (said rising higher at the end of the word) means 'newspaper'

bào (said descending lower at the end of the word) means 'to plane (wood)'

bạo (also said descending but with much heavier emphasis) means 'impoliteness'

bào (said with a dip downwards in the middle like the miaow of a cat) means 'typhoon'

bào (said with a downward wiggle in the middle and hard to distinguish from 'bào') means 'indicate'.

phần về dân số Việt Nam học điều tra dân số năm 1989, tình trạng biết chữ, số người đi có đến trường hoặc đã theo học một số thể không biết chữ, nọc, biết viết trong năm 1989, một số hạn chế khác phục, vì số dân em đang ở độ tuổi đầu giai đoạn chuyển từ

1 The 12 above it are China, India, USSR, US, Indonesia, Brazil, Japan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Mexico and Germany 2 Vietnam: Stabilization and Structural Reforms, World Bank internal report, April 1990. 3 Vietnam's 1989 Census. 4 Quoted in Women in Vietnam, Susan Allen, a report for the Swedish International Development Authority in Hanoi, 1990. 5 World Development Report 1990, World Bank (Vietnam figure from World Bank internal report). 6 State of the World's Children 1990, UNICEF.

WITNESS an extravagantly emotional scene. A family is leaving Hue on the non-stop express to Saigon. They are all in tears and so too are most of the 20 or so people saying goodbye to them on the platform. I have full view of a young couple who are departing and their sobbing is quite desperate. They throw themselves upon each other in their grief then reach out of the window to touch someone in the crowd, before tumbling again into their sobbing and wailing.

At one point the young man gets so worked up that he makes to throw himself out of the window to reach one of his friends on the platform. But he only succeeds in bringing down the heavy blind on his neck and getting trapped, which lends the proceedings even more of an air of desperation. Finally their train pulls out but the drama is not over: the crowd on the platform goes into a huddle around a woman who has fainted clean away in her misery.

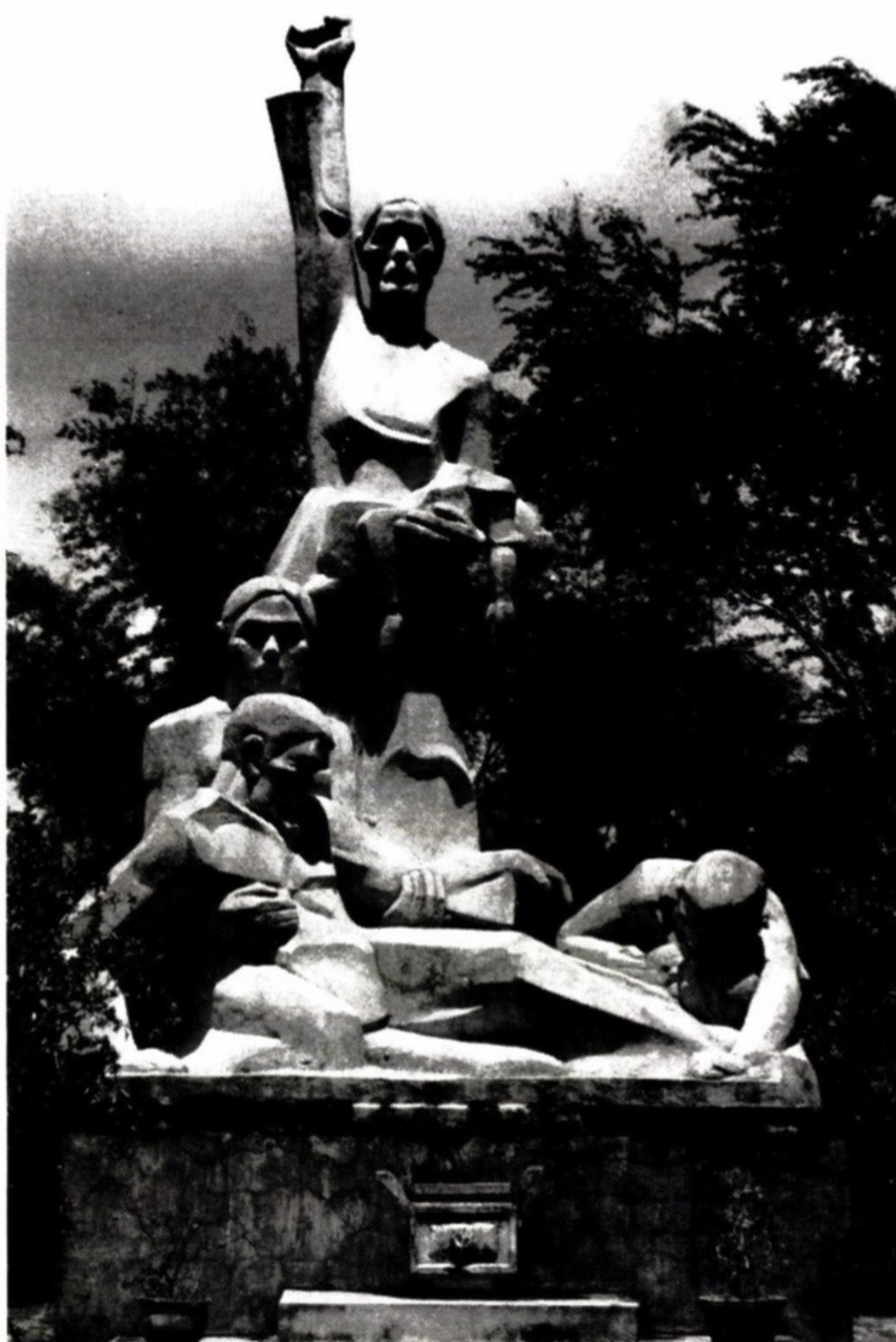
I can only guess that the family is leaving home for ever as part of the 'Orderly Departure Program' which allows a few hundred (South) Vietnamese into the US each year – and the English-speaking guard on my train confirms my theory.

Binh is unsympathetic: 'If they don't want to leave then they should stay'. And maybe they do seem like ungrateful deserters to those left behind to cope with Vietnam's problems. But I can easily imagine the pain of leaving family, friends and homeland for the Great Unknown.

We are travelling by train because Binh's irascible boss has recalled Tam and the car to Hanoi, worried by reports of the typhoon. This is actually good news since we can rent another car in Danang at a fraction of the price charged by the Ministry of Information. Besides, it also gives me the chance to travel by rail from Huê to Danang – and no journey is complete without a train.

The seats are punishingly hard and the train punishingly slow, stopping for an age at country stations with no-one in them but the next parade of hawkers who besiege us with their kettles of tea and their snacks. It brings back vivid memories of days on end spent in Indian trains.

The land is still badly flooded. I drove south out of Huê yesterday with someone from the French aid agency Médecins Sans Frontières to inspect the damage done to a hospital they are supporting (not too serious, though the outlying clinics we passed en route were in a much worse state). He told me that normally from the road you could not see water; now it covered every-



The monument to the massacred at My Lai.

War stories

A DESPERATE DEPARTURE... A SOLDIER REMEMBERS CAMBODIA... IDEOLOGICALLY UNSOUND BREAKFAST... THE COST OF CHOOSING THE WRONG SIDE... A SURVIVOR OF MY LAI

thing between the road and the horizon.

There are some spectacular coastal views. How long will it be before Vietnam starts exploiting places like this for tourism? But the people inside the train are more intriguing than the view. Across the way from me is a teenage girl wearing a baseball cap with the legend 'Jim and Jim's Body Shop' emblazoned on it. Non-Americans may need the explanation that this is not a gay massage parlour but a car mechanics' workshop. I wonder how the girl got hold of the cap and if she knows what its words mean.

I chat with the guard, Long. In 1980, at the age of 20, he was conscripted and spent five years in Cambodia without a single period of home leave. 'I can't tell you how difficult life was there – I saw many friends die. Yes, I killed people: when I was face to face with the enemy I had no option if I

was to stay alive.'

At first Long was idealistic about the war against the Khmer Rouge. 'I felt it was my duty to serve in the People's Army. I felt that now we had achieved our independence we had a responsibility to help a neighbouring country which was not so fortunate. What do I feel now?' He pauses, as if wondering whether he dares say it. 'Well, I think the Cambodian War cost this country too dear.' It occurs to me that this parallels the change in the young American GIs who fought in Vietnam: initial idealism turned to doubt by the general horror and the deaths of friends.

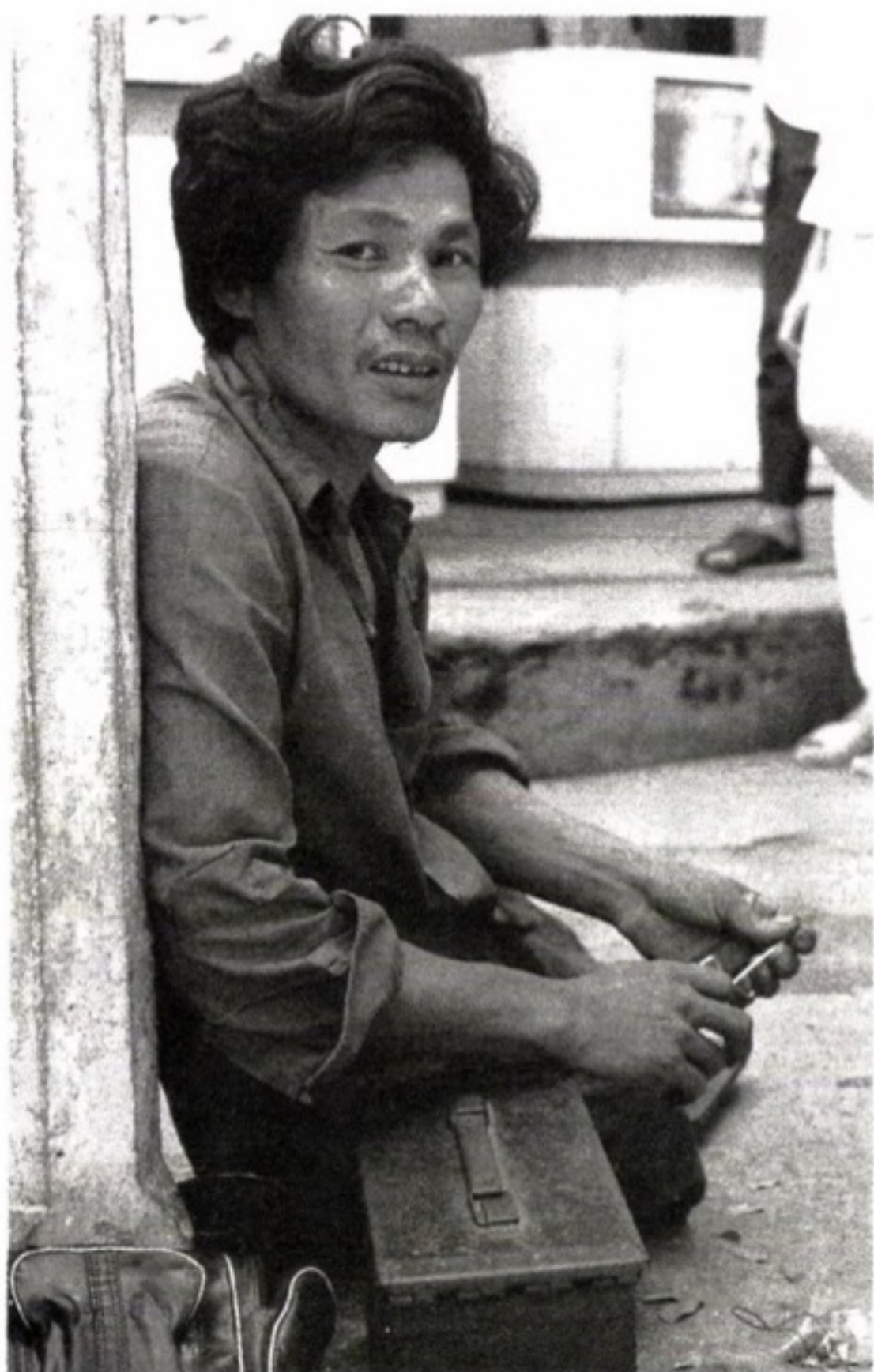
Long is eventually replaced in the seat next to me by a schoolboy whose English is next to non-existent but who nevertheless wishes to practise it. He is in the very epicentre of adolescence, so painfully shy that he keeps a rolled-up newspaper permanently in front of his mouth. His fruitless and eternal search for each word would be very comic if I didn't remember what that hyper-sensitive phase of life was like and realize how much courage it must have taken for him to approach me.

This painful desire to learn English is by no means untypical and it is a tell-tale sign of Vietnam's earnest desire to join the global economy and the wider community of nations. It is only recently that people have realized that English is the language which will get them and the country ahead rather than Russian or French. You sense in the Vietnamese that eagerness to adapt and seize opportunities which marks the successful economies of the Far East. It is by no means unthinkable that economic wonders could be wrought here too.

The hotel in Danang is a cut above any other I have stayed in and I am not complaining: in the morning I linger luxuriously over a French breakfast and coffee, setting aside any ideological reservations about eating bread made from wheat imported with precious foreign exchange. After two weeks without anything recognizable as breakfast I am transported to somewhere close to heaven.

Binh, meanwhile, is finding us a cheap car and driver from a 'co-operative' – a squeamish Government euphemism for a private business. The driver undercuts the State prices and offers none of the bureaucracy – capitalism is on the move here and this is the kind of thing that makes you understand why.

Danang is a busy port which was a centre for US military operations during the War. On a corner of its main thorough-



Life on the street: disabled veteran Phuong.

fare I get talking to a bicycle mechanic with no legs. His name is Phuong ('Flower'); he's 43 and understandably wary of me. He lost his legs in 1973 to a mine explosion while fighting for the South Vietnamese Army. He was cared for in hospital until Liberation in 1975, at which point the new Communist authorities showed little sympathy with former enemies, despite their rhetoric about national reconciliation. Phuong was thrown out of hospital and has had to fend

for himself on the streets ever since. He makes very little at it – perhaps 20,000 dong (\$4) a month, not enough to live on. He leads a miserable, solitary life though he has been given a room rent-free out of kindness. Life is never going to be easy for him but surely he has suffered enough for the 'sin' of having fought for the wrong side?

Phuong's story is illuminating but also surprising because I am finding the Vietnamese capacity to forgive and forget quite amazing. You would have thought that a Westerner wandering around this country would have encountered a measure of hostility – there can barely be a person in the country who did not lose someone near and dear during the American War. But I encounter not a trace of such resentment, even at My Lai, which we detour to visit in the course of two hard days' driving from Danang to Saigon.

My Lai was the scene of the most infamous US atrocity of the War. Here, in 1968, American soldiers launched an attack on a complex of villages thought to be harbouring Vietcong guerillas. They encountered no resistance and no sign of guerilla activity but still murdered almost everyone they found: 504 people, including 182 women and 173 children (56 of them babies).

The site of one of the worst phases of the massacre has been turned into a commemorative park dominated by a moving piece of sculpture portraying an old woman raising her fist to the heavens and the helicopters while people mourn at her feet.

I speak to Ha Thi Quy, a frightened-

looking woman of 65 who survived the massacre. 'At the moment the soldiers arrived I was cutting up potatoes in my house. I wasn't worried – just a few days before American soldiers had been round asking for water and giving out sweets and cigarettes. But on this day the bombs started falling and the guns firing.

'They rounded me up with all the other people of the village and lined us up by the stream over there. Then they started firing their machine guns from one end of the line to the other. I was hit in the buttocks and landed in the ditch with bodies and blood all over me. I thought I was dead too because I was so covered in blood and so shocked. I survived. But my daughter He and my son Duc were among



Ha Thi Quy beside the ditch into which she and her murdered children were pushed.

the dead. My husband and my other daughter, luckily, were away.

'Before the Massacre I thought the Americans were like neighbours. After it I hated them – and though I don't see the American people as an enemy any longer I still have nothing but hate for the American Government.'

She takes me over to the stream into which the bodies were pushed. It is running now but then it was dry, she says, then adds chillingly: 'but the blood from the bodies made a river of its own'.

It is difficult to absorb the meaning of what she says, so horribly removed is it from normal experience and from this clear, still, sunny day, these tranquil fields. If I put myself in Ha Thi Quy's shoes I know what I would have felt – blind terror. But I find it impossible to imagine myself in the shoes of those young American soldiers spraying a long line of frightened people with machine-gun fire. I know from my reading that they were not monsters but ordinary young men, transformed by war into mass murderers, but here and now, at the scene of their crime, I am not capable of that leap of the imagination.

As I leave the park in subdued mood a gang of small children have fun treating me as a Big Bad Wolf, giggling excitedly and running away only to return, fascinated. You'd think somehow it would be written into their genes that Westerners are dangerous and not to be played with. But the laughter of children is exactly the right one for such a place – I swallow my solemnity, put on my best monster expression and chase after them.

Mr Ky

A chirpy Chinese pushing a bike falls into step beside me and immediately starts rattling away in fluent English. He says he also speaks Cantonese, Mandarin, French and bits of Spanish, German, Japanese and Russian. Within five minutes I have heard his life history.

YOU can see what I do for a living right here – I'm a bicycle taxi. Though I also have two other jobs: guide for tourists

and agent for restaurants. At least it means I'm independent. Of course I'm nowhere near as comfortable as I used to be. For many years I had a good job with a shipping agency. But when Liberation came in 1975 I lost the job and had to find other ways to make ends meet. This was what I hit on in the end, though of course up until four years ago we couldn't even talk to Westerners. Things are much better now.

Was I bitter about losing my job? Of course I wasn't happy but there's no point in dwelling on that, you just have to get on and make the best of things. And, like I said, things are better: Vietnam has been 15 years in the darkness but now it's seeing the light. We need all kinds of

help, especially from the Americans, because we have to open up and get out of this poverty.

In the old days there were 100,000

Chinese here in Danang – now it's down to maybe 20,000. The rest went overseas – or tried to. The ones that made it to the US or Europe were very lucky but there were many thousands who didn't make it and died at sea. With every gamble there are winners and losers and me, I wasn't going to take the risk.

I'm getting old now – I'm 58 and I've reached the evening of my life. I lead a lonely life without a wife and children – I always have to rally myself. I never found

anyone and it's too late for me now. Still, I make the best of things. You know there's this excellent Chinese restaurant round the corner – here's the card. And make sure you tell them Mr Ky sent you...



I'M standing on the roof of the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon. From their tables here in 1975 US correspondents boasted that they could cover the Communist advance on the city without having to get up from their drinks. Such cynical arrogance. Yet it's easy enough to imagine the green fields on the other side of the river being lit up by explosions and flares, the city beneath you traumatized by the unknown future that awaited it, Westerners and pro-American Vietnamese scurrying desperately to get a place on the last US helicopters out.

Saigon today is a very different city from the one those US correspondents knew. It even has a different name – though these days only Party stalwarts insist on calling it Ho Chi Minh City. The old Saigon was a city full of vice and corruption, ruled by an incompetent crowd of generals. It was characterized by the night clubs and shady sex-bars that seem the limit of the US soldier's recreational horizons the world over.

When the Communists arrived one of their first acts was to clean up the sleaze and the corruption. My own hotel in the backstreets makes me wonder at first whether they failed: my room has a lamp-stand in the form of a female nude and ceiling mirrors strategically placed over the bed. But the most depraved practice got up to here is the watching of bootlegged James Bond videos from Taiwan – the family that runs the hotel devours them with great glee, despite not speaking a word of English.

Judging by accounts from the time Saigon was a dreadful place before Liberation. So it is disconcerting, to say the least, that I can barely find a single person on its streets who doesn't look back to the Americans' time here as a Golden Age.

This has nothing to do with ideology or 'freedom'. It is a simple question of cash. When the Americans were here they pumped so much money into the economy that everyone benefitted. Many people were directly employed as drivers or office workers, for a start. And while US soldiers may have spent most of their money on bar girls, those bar girls had families and those families bought goods from traders – everyone wound up better off.

The memory of this artificial affluence has given the average Saigonee a distorted picture of how the world works. The Vietnamese Government is measured against standards of wealth that no developing country could hope to match, let alone one so shunned by the global economy. And I find it depressing, after all this nation has been through, that the greatest ambition of so many ordinary people is simply to get to the US.

I hold an unofficial 'Council of the Poor', for instance, among the shanty shacks built on stilts by the Saigon River. Four families crowd round in an alley leading down to the water and instead of choosing one person to interview I ask

The American Dream

SAIGON DE-SLEAZED... THE LONG ARM OF THE US DOLLAR... A COUNCIL OF THE POOR BY THE RIVER... GIs' CHILDREN LEAP IN THE DARK... AN IMPOSSIBLE FANTASY IN THE MEKONG DELTA



Land of our fathers: GIs' children look West. questions of them all.

Back in 1948 this area was a lake. An old couple tell me they were among those who filled it in by painstakingly digging earth out of nearby fields. Now these families live by selling charcoal, which they buy in the countryside for 550 dong (about 10 cents) a kilo and sell illegally in the city for 600. *Doi moi* has made no difference to them on the economic front and they still have to purchase the blind eye of local police every now and then.

'Poor people like us keep asking for things but we never get anything,' says the most outspoken member of the group, a bare-chested man of about 35. 'At least we can speak out now – we wouldn't have dared to talk to you like this a couple of years ago. But if we asked for the kind of changes that would make us as rich as people in other countries we'd be put in prison.'

I know by 'other countries' he really means the US. I try rather feebly to explain that no policy the Vietnamese Government adopted could possibly make its people as rich as Americans. But they pour scorn on my argument. 'When the Americans were here,' pipes up another man, 'one person in work could feed a family of eight or nine;

now he struggles to feed himself'. And all but the two old people agree that if they had the chance to go to the US tomorrow they'd go like a shot.

It is very sad that American money, even the distant remembrance of it, should have so much power over the imaginations of ordinary Vietnamese in the South. Their view is distorted because they do not realize that most of the world's people live in poverty. They seem to believe that Vietnam is virtually unique in being denied the benefits enjoyed by Americans.

Yet on the other hand, of course, they see the reality of a world divided into rich and poor enclaves more clearly than anyone else. Unlike most people in the developing world they have seen American wealth at first hand and they see no reason why they shouldn't have their share of it. The boat person I spoke to in Hanoi had set sail for a rich-world 'paradise'; and, judging by my Council of the Poor, that is why most such refugees take their chances on the ocean – they say some of their neighbours in this stilt suburb were among the first 'boat people'.

'Getting to America' is the recurring theme of my stay in Saigon and the South – it crops up again and again. This is least surprising with one group of people: the 'Amerasian' children of US GIs. For more than a decade these children – 40,000 of them – were ignored by the governments of both Vietnam and the US. Many of them faced ostracism or discrimination and they were a common sight on the streets of Saigon, making ends meet by begging or petty crime.

It took the US until 1989 to accept responsibility for the problem but it is now allowing anyone with obvious white or black parentage to emigrate – about 1,500 are now leaving each month. A Transit Centre has been built on the outskirts of the city. It is clean and well-equipped, with caring Vietnamese staff. From here the 'Amerasians' will be transferred to a camp in the Philippines for six months of 'cultural orientation'. Finally they will be welcomed in the US by voluntary agencies such as the International Catholic Migration Commission.

This is all very well but I can't help fearing for their fate. I meet the young people in their social centre and they crowd around eagerly listening to the unfamiliar language they are going to have to learn. Some look very Vietnamese, while others could pass for white or black and there are all shades in between.

Most seem to have spent their whole life dreaming of getting to the US. They believe all their problems will be solved by this one miraculous jump into the rich world. Dung, the 23-year-old son of an electrical technician from Arizona, is one of the few to have his father's name and photo – though not his current whereabouts. 'I think life will be easier there than here,' he says.

But will it? The US is a very rich

country but it is also something of a jungle. It has violent ghettos packed with poor, mixed-race people, and you can't help but feel that's where a half-Vietnamese with no education and limited English is most likely to wind up. The same goes for Thanh, a 20-year-old woman with an unknown black father. She now has a two-year-old child herself – and black single parents are not known for their prosperity in the US.

But maybe I'm underestimating them. After all, there are plenty of Vietnamese who have already made good in the US. There is an awful lot of money finding its way from the US Vietnamese community back to relatives and friends in the old country. In fact this is the solution to the riddle that I set myself at the start of my trip. The videos and Honda motor scooters I see on the streets are not paid for out of people's meagre local earnings, which are barely enough to keep them going from day to day. They derive from the little packages sent every month by Vietnamese who have made good abroad. Those people on the station platform back

in Huê might have rued the departure of their loved ones – but in the long term they are likely to benefit too.

Even out in the paddy fields of the Mekong Delta, the richest food-growing area in Vietnam, the American connection slaps me in the face. I travel out into Long An province to see what life is like for the farmers of the South. I wander off into the fields, walking the tightrope of a narrow, muddy causeway between two waterlogged paddy fields. A group of ten women are bending to their work; I ask for a volunteer and in the end Nuong shyly steps forward. She washes her hands and we end up talking on her employer's verandah.

She is 39 and has two children; her husband used to work in a state-owned animal-feed factory but that recently closed (part of the free-market shake-down) and he is now unemployed. So the whole family is at the moment dependent on what she can earn as a casual labourer.



A sad Nuong - with her employer, Tuo (inset).

She has one month's work for this farmer, who pays her 4,000 dong (80 cents) a day, but she has no guarantee of work and last year found nothing for five months – she had to borrow in order to buy food.

Unlike the peasants of the North who now have their leased patch of land, Nuong has nothing. Here in the South *doi moi* has meant the land reverting to its former owners. Her employer is one of these. He's a 63-year-old man with a ready smile called Tuou, who bought two hectares of land with his life savings from fishing back in 1963. At Liberation the Communists nationalized the land and he worked in a co-operative but in 1986 he got his two hectares back. In his house he has a TV, a video and a cassette deck. He is infinitely better off than Nuong. But it would be hard to hold this against him personally. You just wish Nuong and the others like her had some sort of welfare safety net as they face up to the rigours of the free market. There is no such thing.

What keeps Nuong going is the hope that one day she will make it to the US. Her cousins are there; it seems like just about everyone in the South has some kind of relation in the States. She doesn't know the name of Vietnam's leader, let alone the name of the US President, and yet she harbours this dream that one day a magic plane ticket will release her from poverty, undernutrition and insecurity. It is inexpressibly sad.

The US used these people. It denied them the united independence they would certainly have voted for if elections had been allowed to take place in 1956. Then it turned their land into the main battlefield for its worldwide crusade against Communism. And since the War ended the US has led a trade-and-aid embargo that has ensured Vietnam's isolation and dashed its hopes of recovery.

Yet all over the south of Vietnam there are these people whose only thought is to leave their homeland. This is the last place in the world I would have expected to find an American Dream. ●



Things are looking up – small traders are back in business on the streets of Saigon.

A history of VIETNAM

1 Ancient history

Vietnam's early history is dominated by China, which tended to regard its southern neighbour as a province – albeit a somewhat unruly one. In 111 BC the Han Dynasty formally annexed what was then called Nam Viet – and the country remained part of China for a thousand years. Vietnam absorbed Confucian traditions but never lost its separate identity and in 939 the rebel Ngo Quyen lured the Chinese fleet onto spikes concealed under the high tide and set up an independent state.

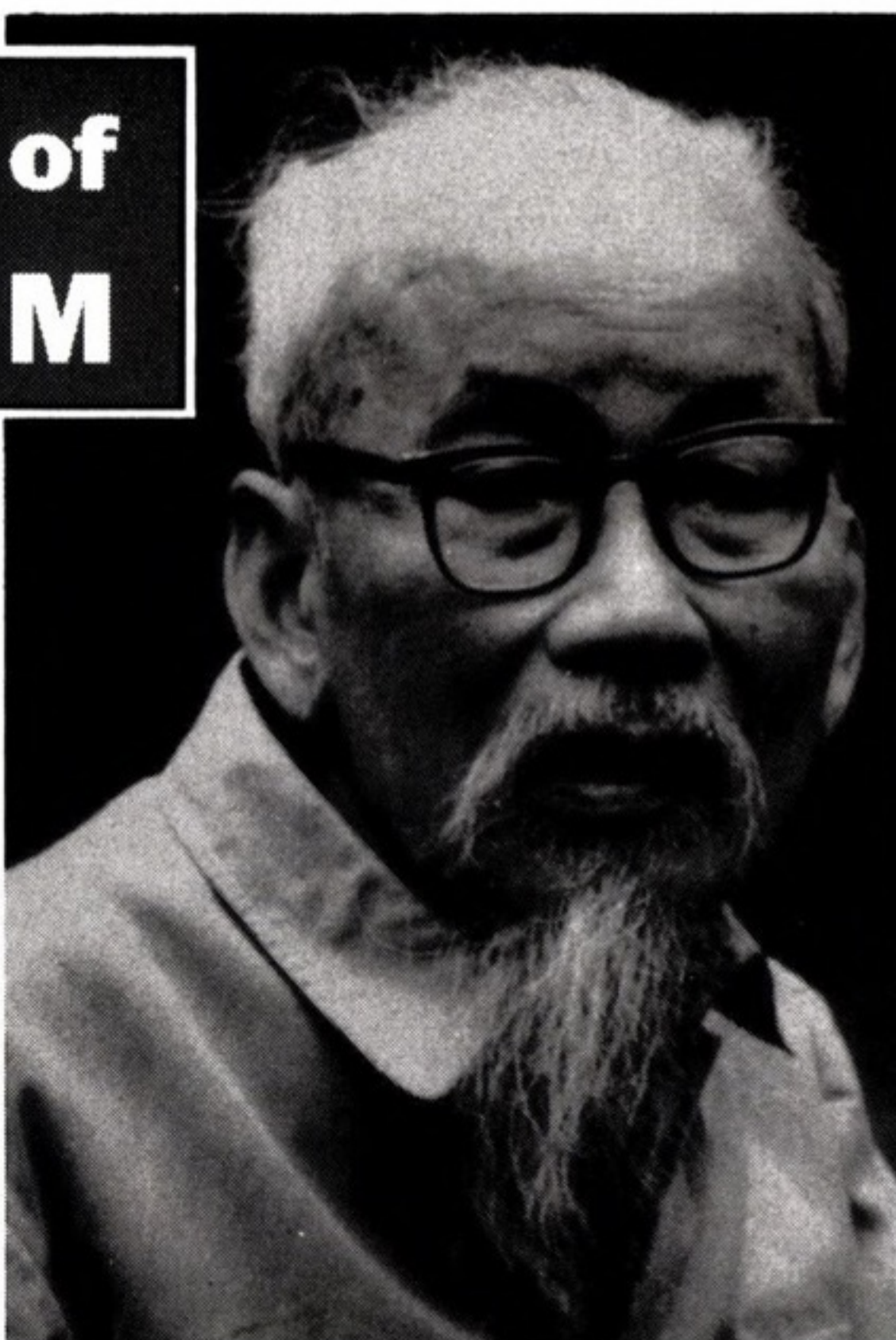
The independent Vietnam was ruled, like China, by a series of imperial dynasties. The greatest of these was the Le (1427-1789), established when Le Loi – who still has a street named after him in every city – expelled the latest set of Chinese oppressors. The Le dynasty expanded south to take over the Champa kingdom, inhabited by people of Malay origin, and establish the boundaries of modern Vietnam.



2 French colonialism

The first French were missionaries who dabbled in politics. The Vietnamese emperor's execution of the more troublesome of these prompted Napoleon III to send troops. They attacked in 1858 and eventually established the colony of Cochinchina in the south of Vietnam, with Saigon as capital. The French gradually eroded the power of the emperors further north, while keeping them as puppet figureheads. In 1887 French Indochina was formed from the colony of Cochinchina and the protectorates of Annam (central Vietnam), Tonkin (northern Vietnam), Cambodia and Laos.

The French justified their rule of Indochina by the idea that they were bringing 'into light and liberty the races and peoples still enslaved by ignorance and despotism'. In reality Vietnam was treated as a huge plantation fuelling French industrialization.



3 Ho Chi Minh

Born Nguyen Sinh Cung in 1890, Ho left Vietnam at the age of 21 as a galley boy on a French freighter. After three years at sea he worked in New York and London, beginning a lifetime habit of changing his name to mark each new phase. In London he was Nguyen Tat Thanh but in Paris, where he spent six years, he marked a new political commitment by calling himself Nguyen Ai Quoc ('Nguyen the Patriot'). He joined the Communist Party and travelled to Moscow in 1924, where he was known as Comrade Linh. In Canton for the next three years he was Ly Thuy, a mobilizer of Vietnamese students.

In 1928 he was with Vietnamese dissidents in Thailand, wearing the shaven head and saffron robes of a Buddhist monk and the name Thau Chin. In 1929 he assembled rival factions in Hong Kong and launched the Indochinese Communist Party. He was arrested and imprisoned but escaped by persuading a prison guard to report him dead. He spent the 1930s drifting between China and the Soviet Union, awaiting the right moment. The Second World War provided it.



4 The Vietminh

In 1940 Japan occupied Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh founded the Vietminh (the League for the Independence of Vietnam) as a broad-based nationalist movement to fight the Japanese – and he returned home for the first time in 30 years to organize resistance from a cave in the northern hills.

Japan surrendered in August 1945 and Allied leaders agreed that Britain would occupy the south of Vietnam and China the north. But the Vietminh marched down from the hills to liberate Hanoi before the Chinese arrived. On 2 September 1945 the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed, with Ho as President. His inaugural speech quoted from the US Declaration of Independence and reflected his hopes of US support. But even Moscow failed to recognize the new republic. The British ruthlessly suppressed the Vietminh in the south and helped the French to re-establish their old colonial system.

The French return forced the Vietminh back into the hills and a long war ensued. Ho's guerillas were backed after 1949 by newly Communist China while the French war effort was paid for by a US now agonizing about Communist expansion.

Frustrated that guerilla warfare never allowed them to use their superior firepower, the French decided in 1954 to lure the Vietminh into a battle at Dien Bien Phu, a

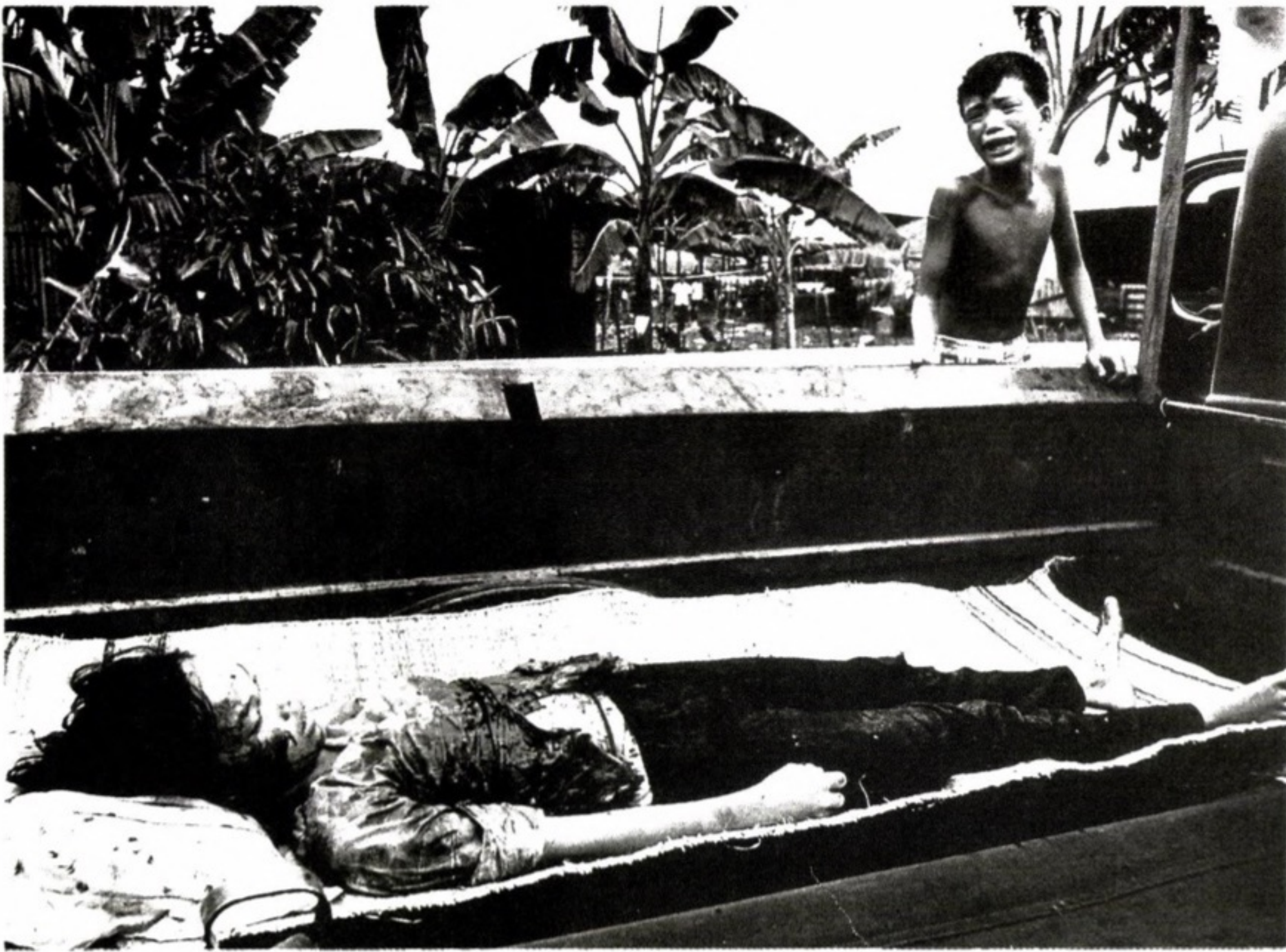


Vietminh General Giap plans the attack on Dien Bien Phu.

valley near the Laotian border. But the Vietminh mobilized an army twice as big as expected and hauled heavy artillery to the top of steep hills surrounding the valley, something the French had considered impossible. After 55 days of intense bombardment Vietminh troops over-ran Dien Bien Phu and the French colonial period was over.

5 Partition

The 1954 Geneva Conference divided Vietnam temporarily in two: the Communist North led by Ho and the South led by a maverick Catholic called Ngo Dinh Diem. The Conference specified that free elections were to be held before 1956 and the country reunited. But the US never ratified the agreement. President Eisenhower said in his memoirs: 'I have never talked... with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs, who did not agree that had the elections been held... 80 per cent of the population would have voted for Ho Chi Minh'. Elections were ruled out and the US began bolstering up the Diem regime in South Vietnam, which tortured and executed thousands of Vietminh supporters. The Communists did not respond until 1960, when a new patriotic movement rallied all Diem's opponents of South Vietnam – the National Liberation Front. A new war had begun.



6 The American War

Under President Kennedy, US involvement mounted steadily. US military 'advisers' regularly went into combat and on bombing missions. But their disenchantment with the corruption and incompetence of the Diem regime increased. In 1963 Diem and his brother Nhu launched a vicious repression of Buddhists and the world was shocked by the protest of a monk who set himself on fire. The US backed a coup by dissatisfied generals, who assassinated both Diem and Nhu.

Conflict escalated. The North poured its own troops covertly into the South down the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' through the mountains. In 1965 President Johnson began the sustained

bombing of North Vietnam and the first marines arrived in Danang. By the end of that year there were 200,000 US soldiers in Vietnam; by the end of 1966 there were 400,000.

But it was not a war to their taste. The guerillas would strike and then disappear into vast underground tunnel networks or else into the local community. Instead of using their superior firepower, US soldiers were eternally on patrol wondering when the next mine or booby trap would strike. Too often they responded by treating any Vietnamese villager as a threat to be liquidated. At least 25,000 civilians were killed and 50,000 more injured every year.

7 War and peace

On the eve of Tet (the Lunar New Year) in 1968, the North launched a major attack intended to liberate South Vietnam before an ailing Ho Chi Minh died. In the short term it failed: nowhere did the local population rise up in support and the rebels suffered devastating losses. But the Tet Offensive was a long-term success. TV coverage of it profoundly shocked a US public which had been told everything was under control: instead they saw the Communist flag raised over Huê and the US Embassy in Saigon attacked. The US anti-war movement gathered momentum and the will to fight began to evaporate.

The new US President, Richard Nixon, spread the war into Cambodia – the Khmer Rouge ultimately came to power as a result – but also started disengaging from Vietnam. US forces were steadily reduced and a peace agreement was eventually signed on 27 January 1973. The Americans withdrew as planned within 60 days but both Vietnamese armies carried on fighting.

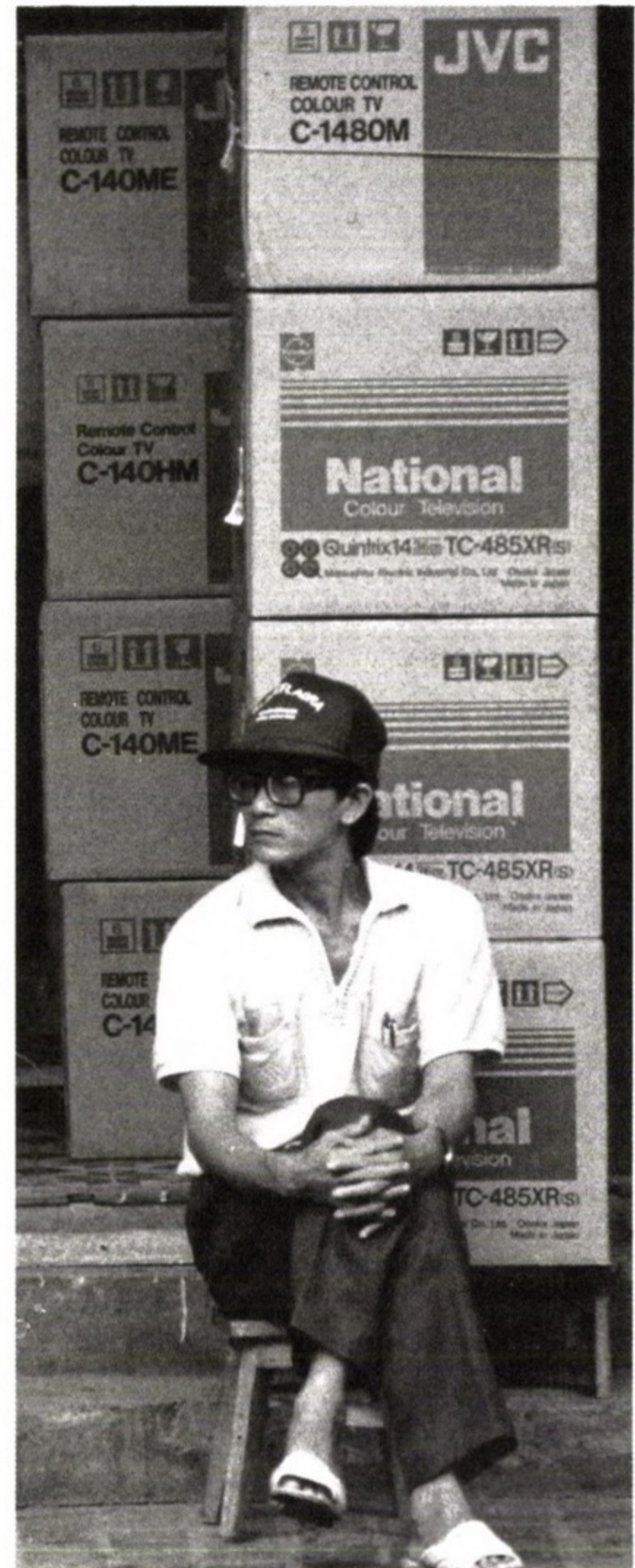
The US withdrawal devastated South Vietnam's economy. The North launched another major offensive on 10 March 1975 and routed their demoralized opponents; on 30 April Saigon was liberated and Vietnam reunited.



8 A new era

The new Government of all Vietnam hoped for Western aid in reconstruction – and particularly for three billion dollars in war reparations which Nixon had promised. No money came and the prospect of rapprochement receded even further in 1979 when Vietnam invaded Cambodia and deposed the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime.

Vietnam paid a triple price for this service to humanity: its own troops stayed for ten years, draining the domestic economy of material and human resources; China invaded



Vietnam as 'punishment' for the attack on their Cambodian ally; and the Western nations imposed an economic embargo which wrecked any hope of reconstruction and is still in place today.

Isolated, ground down by decades of war, lost in economic stagnation, the Vietnamese Government had no alternative but to change course. The first concessions to market economics came in 1979. But the real change came at the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party in 1986, when Nguyen Van Linh emerged as General Secretary and the *doi moi* reforms were approved. The reforms are gathering pace all the time and it cannot be long now before the West stops shunning Vietnam as an enemy – and starts trusting it as a friend.



Coming to terms

It's time to try and make sense of what I've seen. This has been a disturbing trip for me. Not because of the poverty and desperation I have witnessed, depressing though that is. Sadly, poor people in trouble were one thing I did expect to find in coming to Vietnam.

No, the trip has been disturbing because it has challenged some of my own basic assumptions. The pro-American leanings of people in Saigon that I mentioned in the last chapter are a case in point. I have always seen the US involvement in Vietnam as a criminal mistake. And nothing I have seen or heard on this trip has changed my mind about that. But I have also always thought of the Americans and their puppet regime as chronically unpopular with ordinary South Vietnamese people. I now know things were a bit more complicated than that.

The new economic thinking is often disconcerting, too. I've always argued against the injustices of a free-market capitalist system. The arthritic central planning of the Soviet Union and its allies has never been any sort of alternative. But that doesn't rule out all forms of planning and, besides, socialist countries like Vietnam, Cuba and Angola have seemed quite justified in keeping at arm's length a global economic system founded on the exploitation of the Third World. So it is rather alarming to come to Vietnam and find it tearing up its own blueprint as a failure, to find it plunging enthusiastically into the

**COMMUNISTS AS CAPITALISTS ...
GERIATRIC LEADERS ...
SHADOWS OF TIANANMEN ...
WAR AND PEACE ... AT THE
END OF THE JOURNEY CHRIS
BRAZIER WONDERS WHAT IT
ALL MEANS - AND SOUNDS A
NOTE OF WARNING**

implacable ocean of the global market.

Time and again I find myself in the bizarre position of worrying more about the dangers of the free market than the Government advisers and senior Communist Party members I interview. I talk in Hanoi, for instance, to the head of the government committee charged with encouraging foreign investment. I ask if he isn't worried about the damage multinational corporations are going to do in Vietnam if they are allowed a free rein. Surely he must be learning from the experience of other developing countries?

'The only thing we are learning from our neighbours is what deal they are offering the multinationals in order that we can undercut them,' he says. 'We want to offer foreign companies *more* profit, *more* freedom to operate, so that we can attract as much of their money here as possible.'

It turns out this man, who was once Mayor of Hanoi and a stern advocate of socialist central planning, now sees South Korea as the model for Vietnam to try and emulate. This is an answer to delight the

World Bank, which last year applauded the boldness of price and exchange-rate reforms which 'went further than any previous such reform in planned economies'. Yet even it is concerned that 'the development of indigenous entrepreneurs and firms can be hampered if the economy comes to be dominated by foreign firms'.

I may worry about Vietnam entering the global economy naked and vulnerable; about the impact of its reforms on health and education. But hanging back in principled poverty and stagnation is simply not an option. Vietnam has explored one alternative to the free-market orthodoxy and found it to be a dead end. You can understand why it now wants to join the economic highway on which everyone else is travelling.

Yet another challenge to my own assumptions is in the area of human rights. Now I must admit political repression in countries like Cuba and Vietnam has not been at the top of my campaigning agenda over the years. Western governments have seemed to make enough noise about it not to need me.

But it is clear that in Vietnam before 1986 there was widespread fear of informers and the neighbourhood police. *Doi moi* has changed things dramatically - people can speak much more freely and I have all kinds of conversations that a Western journalist could not have had a few years ago. Yet I am shocked by the amount of self-censorship that has to go on even now.

People still steer clear of politics: again and again they trail off, saying something like 'this is getting dangerously political...'

In only one case do I really penetrate this understandable reserve and find dynamite underneath. I have been given Thuy's name and address by a Vietnamese in the West. I am careful when I make contact with her and keep our two evening meetings quiet from my interpreter and the Ministry of Information (who generally try to 'control' my itinerary). On the first evening Thuy (a pseudonym) is very cagey: the conversation doesn't venture out of safety. But in the course of the second evening she decides she has enough confidence in me to talk freely.

She and her friends in Hanoi's student or intelligentsia circles are very impatient for faster change. 'The Party leaders are geriatric and right out of touch,' she says scornfully. 'We can't trust them to bring in the changes we need. We need other political parties apart from the Communists – we are all talking about pluralism now (in private). We need democracy as well as dollars here in Vietnam.'

Dangerous impatience

Thuy's attitudes, even her phrases, vividly recall the impatient talk of students in China in the summer of 1989. I end up counselling caution for fear that Thuy and her friends might push things too far, too fast, so that something similar to the Tiananmen Massacre puts an end to reform. In truth she and people like her are a tiny minority still a long way from taking to the streets – they know that most Vietnamese are more concerned about living standards than greater democracy, and the Government can hardly be accused of timidity on the economic front.

But the Chinese parallel is a valid one since, as it did in Beijing, a battle is going on within the Vietnamese Communist Party between reformers (led by the Foreign Ministry) and conservatives (led by the Interior Ministry). In general since

1986 the reformers have had the upper hand but every now and then they suffer a reversal. In the run-up to the 100th anniversary of Ho Chi Minh's birth last year, for instance, there was a clampdown, with Western journalists and aid workers expelled for alleged CIA destabilization.

As in China, the Communist Party knows that economic change is inevitable – but it finds political reform much more difficult to accept. The Party now acknowledges some of its past mistakes and there are campaigns aplenty against bureaucratic corruption. But the revolutions in Eastern Europe scared the Communist hierarchy witless, with the result that 'pluralism' or multi-party democracy is as taboo as it ever was.

Besides, there may well be a case for soft-peddalling on the political front – and not just because pushing too hard might provoke a backlash. In Saigon I speak to the editors of a Catholic newspaper who are certainly of that view. Intelligent and articulate, they seem able to say most of what they want in print – even though they have to meet monthly with a Party Propaganda Committee.

I ask them if they would be allowed to advocate multi-party democracy. 'Now that's another matter. We can talk of pluralism but not of multi-partyism – an important distinction. Besides, we're not necessarily of the view that a multi-party system would be the right thing here at the moment. Look at the convulsions in Eastern Europe where they've tried to switch over immediately and become very unstable – you can be sure things would be worse in a poor country like Vietnam. We have to change bit by bit. But we'll arrive in the end in our own Vietnamese way – which usually means waiting for what you want a bloody long time.'

The risk of a clampdown is real enough, mainly because of the economic dangers ahead. Vietnam's only aid since the War has come from the Soviet bloc (with the notable exception of Sweden). But that dribbled to a halt in the course of 1990 as old priorities gave way to new in Moscow. Vietnam was in dire enough trouble even with this help and at the moment the West shows no sign of moving into the breach.

As a result Vietnam could be forced into a rapprochement with its age-old enemy, China, which has offered aid, but on one condition: that there is no more political liberalization. If the West does not change its tune soon, the conservatives are going to have hard cash on their side.

So, even leaving aside questions of humanity, it is in the political interests of the West to end the economic embargo and start offering some aid – and thereby stop a new hard-line Asian Communist bloc of China, Vietnam and Cambodia coming into being. There are commercial benefits to be had too: I am assured by a Japanese entrepreneur visiting Danang that 'the Vietnam market has great potential' (you

can trust the Japanese to get in early).

The Western ban on trade and aid – 'this barbarous embargo', the Assistant Foreign Minister calls it when I meet him in Hanoi – has been all too effective. Vietnam may have won the War but in a very real sense the US has won the peace. Yet again (as in Nicaragua) an economic embargo has proved much more effective than military action in bringing a recalcitrant Third World country to its knees. Vietnam is now not only desperate to make friends; it has also discarded all but the rhetorical shell of its old Communist principles. What more does the US want?

A great adventure

That sounds a very negative conclusion for those of us who have sympathized with Vietnam's stand over the years – it has been ground into submission and accepted the way of the (Western) world. But there is no need to see it that way if you take your cue from the Vietnamese people. Far from feeling a sense of defeat, they are full of enthusiasm for the changes sweeping through their country, excited by the idea that they might at last be able to cast off their pariah status and make friends with all the world. They see their fresh start as a great adventure.

And they have such energy and ability that it is not so far-fetched to imagine an economic miracle taking place here. Imagine the courage, commitment and skill that the Vietnamese showed in defeating the greatest military power on earth and then imagine all of that focussed on commerce and trade, on making headway in the global marketplace. Give them half a chance and watch them fly.

Vietnam is more than ready to forgive and forget. I lose count of the number of times people tell me: 'all we want now is to live in peace'. The war is over. Give peace a chance. George Bush, are you receiving me?

★ ★ ★

In Nhatrang, which boasts the most beautiful beach in Vietnam, I get up at dawn for a swim before continuing my punishing car journey. The water is so warm that it is hard to swim and I lie back in the shallows as though I were in a bath. Even so early there are hundreds of people out on the beach exercising and swimming, making a vigorous start to the day. Petty traders are already out: commerce is in full swing. As I walk back past the beach café I notice a woman picking through a garbage bin for interesting scraps. And one of those old Communist Party loudspeakers is fighting a losing battle against a song by that most all-American of pop groups, the Carpenters. But everyone I see is smiling. ●

ACTION

The key group in your country to contact if you want to take action on Vietnam.

AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

Vietnam Action and Information Network, PO Box 9716, Wellington. Tel: (Kath Kelly) (04)-850-703.

AUSTRALIA

Australian Vietnam Society, PO Box 435, Jamieson, ACT 2614.

CANADA

Anglican Church Primate's Fund, 600 Jarvis St, Toronto M4Y 2J6. Tel: (416)-924-9192.

UNITED KINGDOM

Britain Vietnam Association, c/o Len Aldis, Flat 2, 26 Tomlins Grove, London E3 4NX. Tel: (081)-980-7146.

UNITED STATES

American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry St, Philadelphia, PA 19102. Tel: (215)-241-7150.

¹ Vietnam: Stabilization and Structural Reforms, World Bank internal report, April 1990.

EL SALVADOR

Survivor

New community grows from the ashes of a massacre

LITTLE remains of the village of El Mozote in north eastern El Salvador. The charred shells of a few burnt-out houses are now covered in vegetation; the area is scattered with human bones that are a testimony to an army massacre that wiped out the village.

Local human rights organizations are now attempting to sue the Atlacatl battalion of the Salvadorean army for the cold-blooded massacre in 1981 of 1,200 civilians. A key witness testifying in court is Rufina Vigil, sole survivor of the Mozote massacre, who has recently returned to El Salvador after eight years in exile in Honduras.

Rufina still has nightmares about the winter day when hundreds of Atlacatl troops entered El Mozote, dragged residents out of their homes and forced them to lie face down on the village square.

'The men were led off to the church', recalls Rufina, 'and we women were all herded into a nearby house. My three children were clinging to my skirt, and

my eight-month-old baby was feeding at my breast.' Rufina remembers that she stood on a chair to see into the nearby church, and saw that the soldiers had blindfolded and handcuffed the men and were standing on top of them, beating them.

'Then I saw them kill the men - including my husband - one by one. Some were beheaded, others were machine-gunned.'

Later, the soldiers came for the women, taking the younger ones to be raped and killed first. Then they came for Rufina.

'I was led out in a group of 22 women, at the end of the line. The house they were taking us to was full of dead bodies, blood was trickling out from under the door. I knelt down and prayed to God to save me: then I saw my chance. I slipped into the cover of an apple tree and hid among the leaves.'

She stayed hidden from five in the afternoon until 11 at night. 'I heard my own children scream: "Mummy, they're stabbing me!" But I didn't dare to move a muscle - I couldn't even cry.'

At about 11pm the soldiers withdrew. When a herd of cattle wandered by, Rufina slipped out of the apple tree on all fours and crawled along in the middle of the animals.

Rufina eventually fled to



Trying to forget - Rufina Vigil recounts the story of the massacre.

Colomoncagua refugee camp in Honduras, where she lived for eight years with several thousand other refugees. There the refugees learnt skills including shoe-making, mechanics, carpentry and most importantly community organization.

Rufina was one of the group of 8,400 refugees from Colomoncagua who returned to northern Morazan in 1989 and founded Ciudad Segundo Montes. It is named after one of

the six Jesuit priests who were murdered last November by the very same US-trained Atlacatl battalion that massacred the people of El Mozote.

Mary Cabezas

For further information on how you can help to support Rufina's community at Ciudad Montes, contact the El Salvador Committee for Human Rights, 83 Margaret St, London W1N 7HB, tel 071-631 4200/03.

Photo : Steve Smith

TRADE UNIONS

Bottom up

Community unions established in Japan

YUKIE Kinugawa is Secretary of the Koto Community Union in east Tokyo. She works as a book-keeper in Tokyo's Central Fish Market, where she

is also the union shop steward.

'It's a poor industrial district,' she says. 'We set up the union in 1988 to organize ourselves and help workers in small workplaces with informal jobs, part-timers and foreign workers. It's a challenge to build a union from the bottom up.'

Yukie herself is a challenge to the stereotype of Japanese women - a union leader aged

only 27 who, when confronted with the choice, opted for her union work rather than marriage.

Like the 30 or so other community unions in Japan, the Koto Union offers counselling, representation, social support and health and safety advice. Death from overwork, for example, is a serious work hazard in Japan, only now gaining medical recognition. Unlike the large enterprise-based unions, community unions welcome people who are out of work and women working at home.

Community unions campaign on environmental and anti-racist issues. They have given front-line support to foreign workers in Japan. Many of these workers, from China, Bangladesh, the Philippines and elsewhere are attracted by Japan's relatively high wages.

But they have no legal employment status. In Koto, foreign workers often take on the worst jobs and live in fear of arrest. The Koto Union provides these workers with legal and employment advice. Yukie joins

other community union officers in a Tokyo-wide forum on foreign workers' problems.

The Solidarity Union in Hiroshima has helped Korean members, who have suffered racial discrimination under a law that says all foreigners must be finger-printed.

Community unions have also helped put informal workers' problems on the agenda of the established unions. While official unions can ignore community unions on the basis of their size - national membership is as yet only a few thousand - they can no longer ignore the spirit of their work. Rengo, the union confederation with 8.2 million members, is now committed in its 'Basic Objectives' to the 'organization of unorganized workers'.

The problems of Japan's low-status workers cannot be solved overnight, but at least they're now making a start with the help of people like Yukie Kinugawa.

Hugh Williamson



Fighting for Japan's poor - community union leader Yukie Kinugawa.

Photo : Hugh Williamson

CONSERVATION

Fair game

'Shoot-to-kill' anti-poaching policies raise doubts

IN most countries it is not a capital offence to kill a rhinoceros or an elephant, but this has not stopped some African governments from imposing their own instant justice on poachers.

The Zimbabwean authorities, for example, claim to have shot dead 34 poachers in the first nine months of 1990. Effectively Zimbabwe operates a 'shoot-to-kill' policy, with game wardens and security officials legally indemnified against criminal prosecution. The parks and wildlife department has become a refuge for former members of the Selous Scouts, once the elite troops of the white minority Rhodesian regime.

At the same time, however, there are reliable reports of Zimbabwean army involvement in poaching. Edwin Nleya, an army officer who threatened to expose military poaching, was killed in mysterious circumstances early in 1989. An intelligence official investigating his murder has been forced to flee the country.

International conservation bodies appear to endorse Zimbabwe's strong-arm tactics against poachers. Internal documents from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), leaked to the UK newspaper *The Guardian*, show that the organization has provided a helicopter and other logistical support to the Zimbabwean security forces for anti-poaching operations. In a subsequent letter to the newspaper, the director of the London Zoological Society pointedly refused to condemn the 'shoot-to-kill' policy.

African governments' main concern is that poaching threatens revenues from tourism. Little thought is given to why local people resort to poaching. In Kenya, where 34 alleged poachers were killed during the first year of a shoot-to-kill policy, most victims were ethnic Somalis. They are pastoral people and some of their traditional grazing areas have been declared national parks.

Shoot-to-kill policies are in breach of the internationally accepted principle that the use of force must be proportional to the threat posed.

Richard Carver / Africa Watch

AID

Cut

Drastic reductions likely in Soviet support

PRESIDENT Mikhail Gorbachev has decreed immediate cuts in aid to Africa, Asia and Latin America. The economic crisis in the Soviet Union, empty shop counters and falling standards of living, mean that aid is no longer a priority.

According to some estimates, the war in Afghanistan cost the Soviet Union \$15 million a day. Its support for Cuba over the

years has also been considerable.

In addition the Soviets have provided substantial aid to their friends in Africa – notably Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia. They have built more than 340 industrial and agricultural projects in Africa. A further 300 are either under construction or on the drawing-board. About 50,000 African specialists have trained in the Soviet Union.

But attitudes have now changed. Gone is the eagerness to help the victims of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation. 'Why feed these good-for-nothing blacks when we can hardly feed ourselves?' is a commonly expressed sentiment these days.

In a sense it has always been there, just waiting to explode. In 1978, for example, railway workers in the Siberian town of Ulhan-Ude refused to load meat which was being shipped to Angola – for years their own shops had been empty. But until recently no-one dared comment on the problems of Soviet relations with the Third World.

For some countries, however, Soviet aid came when it was most needed. It is hard to imagine Egypt without the Aswan Dam or Guinea without its

Soviet-built bauxite plant. There is gratitude too for Soviet help in the liberation struggles of Angola, Namibia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. And any loans could be repaid in local currency, saving foreign reserves – something the West has refused to do.

But this too has now changed. Another recent decree requires all trade to be conducted in hard currency. In the Kremlin the discussion is no longer about how much to give, but how to get back the billions already lent to the Third World. Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's recent African tour was widely interpreted as a debt-collecting mission.

A large chunk of Soviet aid has, however, been in the form of military hardware, and cuts here should reduce Africa's military expenditure. Aid to sub-Saharan Africa between 1980 and 1984 stood at \$2.1 billion compared to \$5.9 billion in arms supplies. North Africa received a mere \$0.7 billion in aid compared to \$7.9 billion in arms.

So the Kremlin could more easily avoid cutting aid if it reduced the military component.

Charles Quist Adade/Gemini

Soviet aid recipients



IDEOLOGY

The end

Fred Z enters the fray as Thatcher falls

THANKSGIVING Day, November 22, 1990: President Bush dining on turkey and pumpkin pie in the Arabian Desert; the *NI*'s Oxford office toasting 'the end of an era'. It's the day UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher suddenly resigned. One of those events, like the assassination of President Kennedy, when they say you'll remember where you were when you heard the news.

Fred Z (a day in whose life we followed in the November issue of *NI* on ideologies) rang in to say that he'd been on the London Underground at the time. They'd announced Thatcher's departure over the public address system. Unfortunately he was at Bank Station, under the Bank of England, and no-one batted an eyelid. But Fred had been waiting 11 long years for this moment and didn't mean to be deprived of the chance to celebrate, so he rang us.

'I told you so!' he yelled down the 'phone.

'No you didn't!' I replied indignantly, wishing he had. The November magazine might then have claimed a remarkable scoop, a bit-part in history. But I don't suppose I'd have believed him even if he had predicted Thatcher's fall.

'Well, nearly.'

'That's not near enough. Besides, she was stabbed in the back, not defeated. She can say she never lost an election.'

'Good God, you're a gloomy bunch down there. You've been mesmerized by her, forgotten what satisfaction feels like. Cheer up!'

'She used to say that.'

'Yes, it's a funny old world. Remember this time last year? All those revolutions in the East? Who'd have thought then that they'd have booted out the heroine of the Cold War within a year?'

'The Winston Churchill syndrome. He didn't last long after the end of the War either. So what happens next? The end of ideology?'

'Of course not. In fact, I've decided to join a political party.'

'Never! Which one?'

'I haven't decided yet.'

'Fred, you're hopeless!'

'I've just discovered that if

you mix red and green you get black. It's what painters do to get a nice colour – gives it more depth, they say. Just right for a new political party.'

'The anarchists have it already. And it denotes death.'

'Well, you could put a saffron-coloured border round it, or something like that.'

'Sure: the Dead Liberal Anarchist Party. Very attractive.'



'Don't mock. I only rang to exchange fraternal greetings on this historic day. Anyway, must dash. Keep in touch.'

'Fred ...!' I wanted to ask after his family, but he'd hung up.

David Ransom

Illustration: Korky Paul

NICARAGUA

Irradiated mutant turtles

Fears that mutant turtles will soon become a reality are being expressed by environmental groups after plans to dump



nuclear waste off the coast of Nicaragua were revealed. For its beaches are one of the few breeding grounds in the world for six species of turtles. The turtle has become a symbol of the Environmental Movement of Nicaragua since their campaign to protect the breeding grounds began. Now there are plans for a nuclear power plant in the area.

US company, Phillips SA, whose Central American representative is a personal friend of the new Nicaraguan president, Violeta Chamorro, has offered to build this nuclear power station free. The only condition is it runs on nuclear waste imported from the US.

From press release, Environmental Network for Nicaragua, 23 Beviden Street, London N1 6BH.

SOVIET UNION

A year's supply

How many condoms does an able-bodied Soviet man need in a year? Exactly 12 according to a 'men's minimal consumer budget' calculated last year by

Soviet planners and summarized in the new Shatalin plan for a market economy. Yearly supplies of other items include 2.5 kilos of soap, one toothbrush, two bottles of cologne and five pairs of cotton socks. The report in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* comments on the Shatalin programme that the 'per capita calculations' are now out in the open. 'We think that the previous secrecy was because not a single "capita" would be likely to swell up in gratitude for such strictly calculated concern.'

From *World Press Review*, Vol 37, No 11 1990.

AIDS

Women and AIDS

AIDS is now the leading cause of death for women aged 20-40 in major cities in the Americas, Western Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. Globally, the World Health Organization estimates over eight million adults are now infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and more than a third - three million - are women. By the year 2000 the annual number of female AIDS cases will equal the number of male.

A new report on how HIV/AIDS affects women, *Triple Jeopardy: Women and AIDS* looks at how women are threatened in three ways: as individuals being infected through sexual activity, as the traditional carers of those invalidated by AIDS and as mothers of those who have the disease.

Women with little social or economic power face particular risk of HIV infection. In the

Third World, the lack of condoms and ignorance about safer sexual options increase the risks. Traditional constraints on sexual behaviour and poverty often mean women are at risk even if they are well informed. A sex worker whose client refuses to use a condom has two options: possible HIV infection or not making a living that day.

From *Triple Jeopardy: Women and AIDS*, by Judith Mariasy, published by The Panos Institute, 9 White Lion Street, London N1 9PD, UK.

REFUGEES

Mine awareness

The UN is starting a programme to educate Cambodian refugees in the camps on Thailand's border about mines. The project is aimed at teaching the refugees how to identify land mines and booby traps when they eventually return to their country. They will also learn safety procedures to follow when the mines have been discovered. Many of the 300,000 refugees living under UN care in the six camps along the border were maimed by mines as they moved (or were forced to move, by Khmer Rouge soldiers) to the camps in Thailand.

From *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1.11.90

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Lighthouse white elephant

The shenanigans over the 1992 celebrations of the 'discovery' of the Americas (sighted by Columbus 500 years ago) are already well under way. Perhaps the saddest and biggest of white elephants is in the Dominican Republic. Here the 83-year old president, Joaquin Balaguer, has authorized the building of a \$10 million lighthouse as the largest Columbian monument in the world. Destined to be inaugurated in 1992, the lighthouse is planned to project a beam visible all over the Caribbean. Dominicans joke however, that the most dramatic effect when the lighthouse is switched on will be the final collapse of the creaking electrical system in Santo Domingo, their capital city.

From *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol XXIV, No 3.

WASTE

Express recycling

With the opening of a new, larger Zurich main railway station, a new waste-management system was introduced as well. Waste from more than 1,000 trains a day plus the refuse from railway offices, two dozen shops and four restaurants fill four 800-litre containers every day. Separate containers are provided for recycling paper, glass, aluminium and other metals and compost. Waste from trains is sorted by railway workers, while the shops and restaurants sort their own. Packaging material is reduced to pulp on-site. The remainder goes to the incinerator, as before. While the disposal costs in the incinerator are \$75 a tonne, recycled waste is collected free of charge. Only 3.6 tonnes of waste a month now goes to the incinerator, instead of the previous 10 tonnes.

From *Warner Bulletin*, No 27, 1990

EGYPT

Well, well, well

Satellite images have led to a spectacular discovery of water beneath Egypt's Western Desert. There is speculation that it may contain more ground water than was thought to exist in the whole of Africa. A test drilling has indicated enough water for farming 200,000 acres for the next 200 years.

The discovery is of great significance in a country where almost all the farming is in the Nile Valley, occupying only five per cent of Egypt's land surface. Alternative water sources are particularly important as most of the Nile's waters come from drought-prone Ethiopia and water-levels at the Aswan Dam have dropped dramatically.

From *Panoscope*, November 1990

"endquote"

'The Queen's green credentials will be enhanced by the disclosure that she spends more on the purchases and upkeep of horses and carriages (£165,000/\$310,000) than on cars (£73,000/\$140,000).'

From *The UK's Daily Telegraph*

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Knowing the enemy

Why should the victims of apartheid want to create a non-racialist society rather than a black-ruled one? Journalist Julie Frederikse has been asking that question to all kinds of South Africans over the course of five years and 200 interviews. She spoke to NI about it.

I WAS SO struck by this phrase 'non-racialism' – clumsy and hard to unravel as it is – that I decided to start interviewing people to find out what it really meant to them.

I was a founder member of a group based in Zimbabwe called the Popular History Trust, so we decided to create a big database of all the interviews – a sort of 'people's history'.

I approached organizations and people involved on the ground to talk about the idea. People were very keen to talk about non-racialism and suggest interviews. So they became part of shaping the project.

When interviewing, a neat handle at getting at the concept of non-racialism was to ask: 'Who is the enemy?' People would often say to me: 'We first thought that the enemy was the white man. Then we discovered that in fact it was a system.' Even high-school kids would say: 'We have seen the rest of Africa. We know that the solution isn't just putting blacks in where whites were before. We want to restructure our society.'

People in the rural areas would say things like: 'The Siskei or the Transkei is run by blacks. We call them puppets but they are black.' Or they would say: 'Maybe the order to arrest me came from a white but the person who abused me in detention was black.'

I often asked: 'How can you support non-racialism when you have been victims of a system like apartheid?' The replies would be: 'But I've been victimized by blacks', or 'But there were whites who worked with us'.

I will never forget a black guy in Natal who said that he had never conceived that Indians could work hand in hand with Africans. He'd heard about whites: that was part of African National Congress (ANC) history. But the thing that really convinced him was when he found a comrade who would put himself on the line for him and that person happened to be Indian. So non-racialism isn't just black and white. It's people from all backgrounds finding there are ways that they can work together in resistance politics towards a common goal which has to do with restructuring a society no longer based on race.

The roots of non-racialism were partly in the trade-union movement of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and the Communist Party. But you can also trace it back to the fact that early African society wasn't race-based and that when the settlers came they didn't arrive armed with racism. A lot of different frontier relations were forged. Of course there was exploitation – but it wasn't based on race.

The race-based society came about with the discovery of minerals and the introduction

of the compound and migrant labour systems. These were the beginnings of what in 1948 was called 'apartheid'. You had a new mode of production that linked race to class. But non-racialism, I would say, had been there from the beginning.

There were some influences from abroad, of course. The black consciousness movement in the US, for example. If you asked people in Southern Africa 'Who influenced you?' they would say Malcolm X or Eldridge Cleaver or George Jackson. There was a great tradition of literature being passed around. But it didn't empower ultimately. It was rhetoric; it was hairstyles. It was a good thing but, as people said, 'consciousness-raising isn't going to take power'. Black consciousness helped inject power and pride into the movement. But the politics happened after that when people started looking to the ANC and joining up.

What was happening in other African countries was important too. The best example of a truly non-racial African country was Mozambique. Samora Machel said 'We know who our enemy is and it's not the Portuguese. It's the system.' People in South Africa were impressed by that sophisticated politics.

I've thought a lot about whether non-racialism could succeed in, say, the US. When I go back there for visits, the racism hits me so strongly. People say: 'You've just come from South Africa, how can you say that!' Actually an ANC friend was over in Washington for the Mandela visit and she said: 'Gosh, if these black Americans knew that some of my politics comes from Albie Sachs and he is white they would probably chuck me out'. She was astounded that again and again black Americans would say: 'We can't be working with the whites' and she would say: 'That's my history, that's my future, I'm different'. I think the difference can be explained with one basic point: the blacks are in a majority in Africa while in the US they are in such a minority. That whole sub-culture in the US is understandable given that your chances of unemployment are increased and your chances of simply staying alive reduced if you are black.

At the end of the day there is a confidence in South Africa that the trend really is irreversible; that there will be a settlement. There has been a long struggle but blacks are in a majority – and they are not threatened by the idea of whites being involved.

Julie Frederikse's book *The Unbreakable Thread* has just been published by Zed Books (UK) and Indiana University Press (US)



Photo : Gideon Mendel/Magnum

I think.

by Martyn Turner





★ MUSIC

The Rhythm of the Saints

by Paul Simon (Warners)

Paul Simon may never live down the way he reinvented himself on *Graceland*. For nearly 20 years he has been paying court to the musics of the world. But this was the first time he had grafted his own songwriting so closely onto other musics – in this instance, South African township jive or *mbaqanga* – and it was apparent just how much his waning muse was drawing sustenance from borrowed sources. If only Simon had attempted something musically more radical he might have received less flak for his supposed 'colonialism' and aroused fewer of those troubling questions: how much of this music was really his? how were the musicians paid? what sort of plagiarism, if any, was covered up in the credit 'Words and music by Paul Simon'?

The problems are even more apparent on **The Rhythm of the Saints**, in which Simon, more discreetly this time, pays homage to Brazil. Again he uses an international cast – Brazilian percussion groups Olodum and Uakti, but also Cameroonian guitarist Vincent Nguni and Americans JJ Cale and Michael Brecker.

Enjoyable as it is, the album suffers from its low-key approach. The melodic adventure of the more hi-tech *Graceland*, is lacking here. Strangely enough the feeling on many tracks is that Simon has learnt less from the cultures he visits than from those who have been there before him – in particular Talking Heads, whose approach is evident on *The*

Cool Cool River and the title track.

Besides, the tight-assed reticence of Simon's voice holds him back. Where experimenters like David Byrne or New York producer Kip Hanrahan involve themselves in Latin styles by jettisoning their reverence and mucking in, Simon's approach seems hidebound and timid, as if he were trying to hide in the backdrop.

Yet at the same time he seems overimpressed by his own importance as an experimenter: compared with the results when Brazilian artists like Caetano Vaeloso and Tom Ze pay back their debt to US music, this is tame indeed.

Simon claims in the press release: 'We're sailing cultural seas that haven't been charted'. But this misses the point. These seas have been charted plenty; the challenge is to *redraw* the maps. Simon's naively reverent approach to cultural exploration fails to take that on board.

Politics ☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆

★ BOOKS

No Life Without Roots

by Thierry Verhelst (Zed)

This book could be dynamite. Verhelst offers an accessible, well-argued and compassionate

assessment of the West's economic pseudo-culture and what it is doing to us, and then challenges 'Third World development' as our attempt to Westernize the rest. He lets non-Westerners voice their alternative perspectives through interviews and makes an important distinction between the European roots of much Latin American popular culture (including liberation theology) and the very different cultures of Asia and Africa.

Verhelst is trying to reach 'progressive' voluntary aid agencies – he works for one himself, based in Belgium. The good side of this is the sense of encounter and debate: real-life triumphs and disasters, real dilemmas, real people and fresh insights fill the book to bursting. The bad side is the equivocation and reverence for official pronouncements that writing in order to reform bureaucracies inevitably involves.

Hoary questions remain. Is it possible for Western-accumulated money to 'side with the poor'? Are not aid workers themselves, with their globe-hopping lifestyles, an 'uprooting' model for those who come into contact with them?

But contradictions are the stuff of life. It is exciting that politics and spirituality are finally beginning to be mentioned in the same books and Thierry Verhelst clearly has an integrated and respectful sense of what people are about. That's a lot more useful than dynamite.

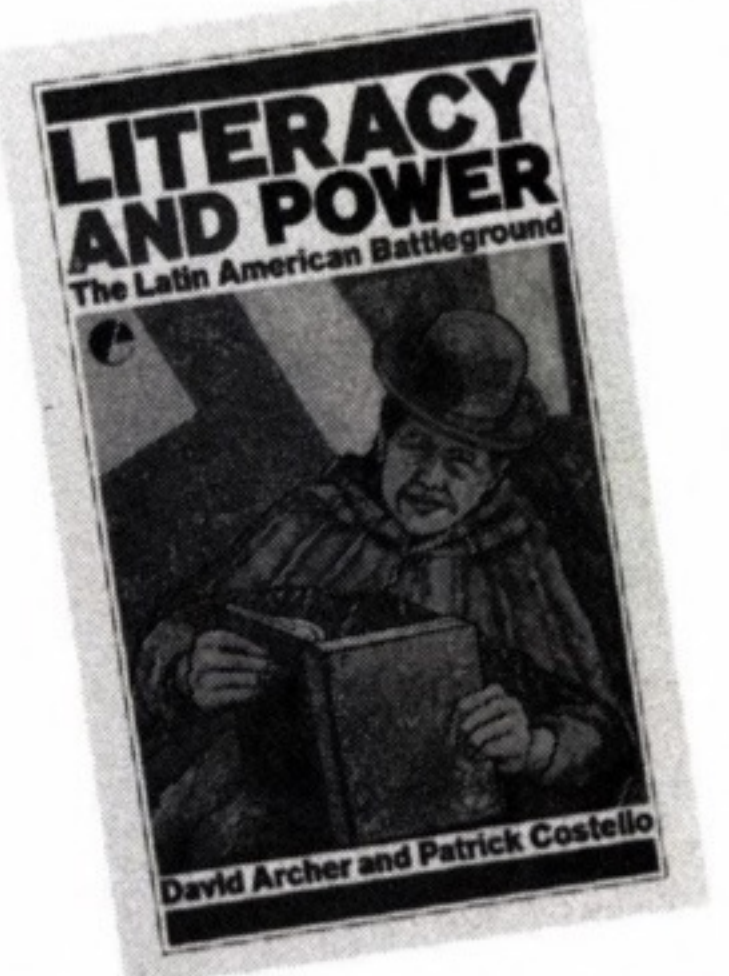
Politics ☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆

Literacy and Power

by David Archer and Patrick Costello (Earthscan)

Life in the US backyard is tough if you are a disenfranchised, landless peasant forced to adhere to the dictates of a ruthless landowner. And if you can't read life is tougher still.

Illiteracy is a vital battle-



ground in Latin America, where the ideas of educationalist Paulo Freire, so influential in the 1960s and 1970s, are still being worked out in practice. Freire's innovative literacy primers, which teach people to read and think politically about their situation at the same time, have changed the lives of thousands of Latin Americans. Literacy is not just about words on a page: it also demystifies radio and television; it makes self-sufficiency accessible.

Archer and Costello provide an illuminating insight into the sweeping changes that this kind



From *Images for the End of the Century* by Peter Kennard (Journeyman).



of popular literacy campaign can bring about – as well as an account of the less successful programmes which are hijacked by governments. First-hand snippets describing communities at the sharp end of war, dictatorship and poverty add immediacy to the text and its message: that revolution can occur without tears and that people power can work if a community is willing to understand and experiment.

That is a big 'if' when you are faced with the full gamut of official propaganda and army intimidation. But being able to read helps people in Chile and Nicaragua, Bolivia and El Salvador, to reassess their past and build a more democratic future.

Politics ★★★★★
Entertainment ★★★



Tilai

directed by Idrissa Ouedraogo

Saga returns to his village after two years away, only to find his father has taken his betrothed Nogma as a reluctant second wife. The young lovers meet in secret; when the village finds out it is outraged by the incest and Saga's brother is assigned to kill him...

As in his last film, *Yaaba*, Burkina Faso director Ouedraogo allows a universal tale to unfold slowly against stunning desert tableaux and the tiny world of an African village. Just as *Yaaba's* fate was determined by being an orphan and having no place in the system, *Tilai*, which means 'the law', is about the thin thread of blood ties by which hangs the social organization of village life.

An inexorable chain of events – Saga flouts his father's authority, Nogma declines to accept her destiny, Yougri refus-



Thwarted love: Ina Cisse and Rasmane Ouedraogo in *Tilai*.

es to kill his brother – is set in motion from the moment when *tilai* is first flouted by the Lear-like father's selfish, unnatural decision to take his son's fiancée for himself.

Fine performances, many of them from ordinary villagers, plus stunning photography and the hypnotic pace typical of Ouedraogo's work, make it impossible to dislike this film. But at times it feels a little too much like a reprise of *Yaaba* and you begin to wonder

Ouedraogo is starting to exploit a winning formula for Western consumption of the Third World.

Politics ★★☆☆
Entertainment ★☆☆☆

★ STAR RATING

Excellent	★★★★★
Very good	★★★★
Good	★★★
Fair	★★
Poor	★

Reviews editor: Chris Brazier

CLASSIC

Candide

...being the book that savaged classical complacency

MURDER, rape, robbery, torture – hardly the stuff of comedy, but in the fast-moving world of Voltaire's naïve hero Candide each disaster brings a new perspective on the basic philosophy of optimism.

And although Voltaire creates a world in which brutality can be extreme, it is also a world where characters go on bouncing back. When the young hero rediscovers his murdered sweetheart, he exclaims 'Can this really be Cunégonde? You are still alive then? To think I should find you in Portugal! So you weren't ravished or disembowelled, as the learned Pangloss assured me?'

'I was indeed,' the lovely Cunégonde replies, 'but people don't always die of those mishaps.'

But the real brutality in Voltaire's world of chirpy characters is the brutality of optimism. The hero and his mentor arrive in Lisbon to a terrible volcanic eruption which kills 30,000 people. The sailor with them rushes off to rape and pillage the dead and dying. 'All this,' the philosopher Pangloss assures his friends, 'is a manifestation of the rightness of things, since if there is a volcano at Lisbon it could not be anywhere else. For it is impossible for things not to be where they are, because everything is for the best.'

The detached language of eighteenth-century reason is everywhere in this book, whose characters talk in terms of what Pangloss calls 'cause and effect, the best of all possible worlds, the origin of evil, the nature of the soul, and pre-established harmony.' The widening gap between the random disasters which occur throughout the book and the coolly logical terms used to wrap them up is the focus of the book's fiercest satire. This is not pure fiction: major disasters in Lima and Lisbon in the mid-eighteenth century were in cruel contrast to the fashionable thinking which saw a God-given place for everything. Voltaire's own *Poem on the Disaster of Lisbon*, published a couple of years before he wrote *Candide*, is scathing about those thinkers bold enough to explain to the people of Lisbon that all was for the best.

Though the suddenness with which some of Voltaire's characters

rise and fall might seem hard to believe, the philosopher's own life was subject to just such sudden switches of fortune. As a young man he won a glowing literary reputation in Paris – and was promptly thrown into the Bastille for six months, suspected of having written a satire on the Regent. He wrote a national epic in prison and on release won the highest accolades – before being thrown in the Bastille again. He was the sharpest cutting edge of the Enlightenment, a freethinker who disputed the God-given rightness of a social order with venial royalty and hypocritical priests at its head.

Written towards the end of a long life and a brilliant literary career, his satire in *Candide* ranges over most of society and its pleasures. Some of it is still uncomfortably close to home, as in the account of the mutilated slave from the sugarworks: 'For clothing we are given a pair of canvas drawers twice a year. Those of us who work in factories and happen to catch a finger in the grindstone have a hand chopped off; if we escape they cut off one leg. Both accidents happened to me. That's the price of your eating sugar in Europe.'

So in this world of brutality and random change is there any respite? Love and woman's beauty is a goal, decides Candide – though typically when he finally finds the lovely Cunégonde she has lost her beauty and he marries her only because her brother forbids it. Women in the world of this book are traded like any other form of currency.

So where is paradise? Not in wealth, or achievement, or the arts, or love or beauty, say the characters. Nor, it seems, in leisure, which turns to intolerable boredom: 'I should like to know which is the worst,' says the old woman who was once a princess, 'to be ravished a hundred times by negro pirates, to have one buttock cut off, to run the gauntlet of a Bulgar regiment, to be whipped and hanged at an auto-da-fe, to be dissected, to row in galleys – in fact, to experience all the miseries through which we have passed – or just to stay here with nothing to do?' 'That's a difficult question,' answers Candide.

At the end of the book the powerful who have lost their power, the wealthy who have been stripped of their riches, and the beautiful who become ugly, do find some peace. And Pangloss pops up again with the old question – whether this proves that everything works out for the best in the best of all possible worlds. By the final page Candide has the sense to dismiss his complex philosophical arguments and walk away to work in his garden.

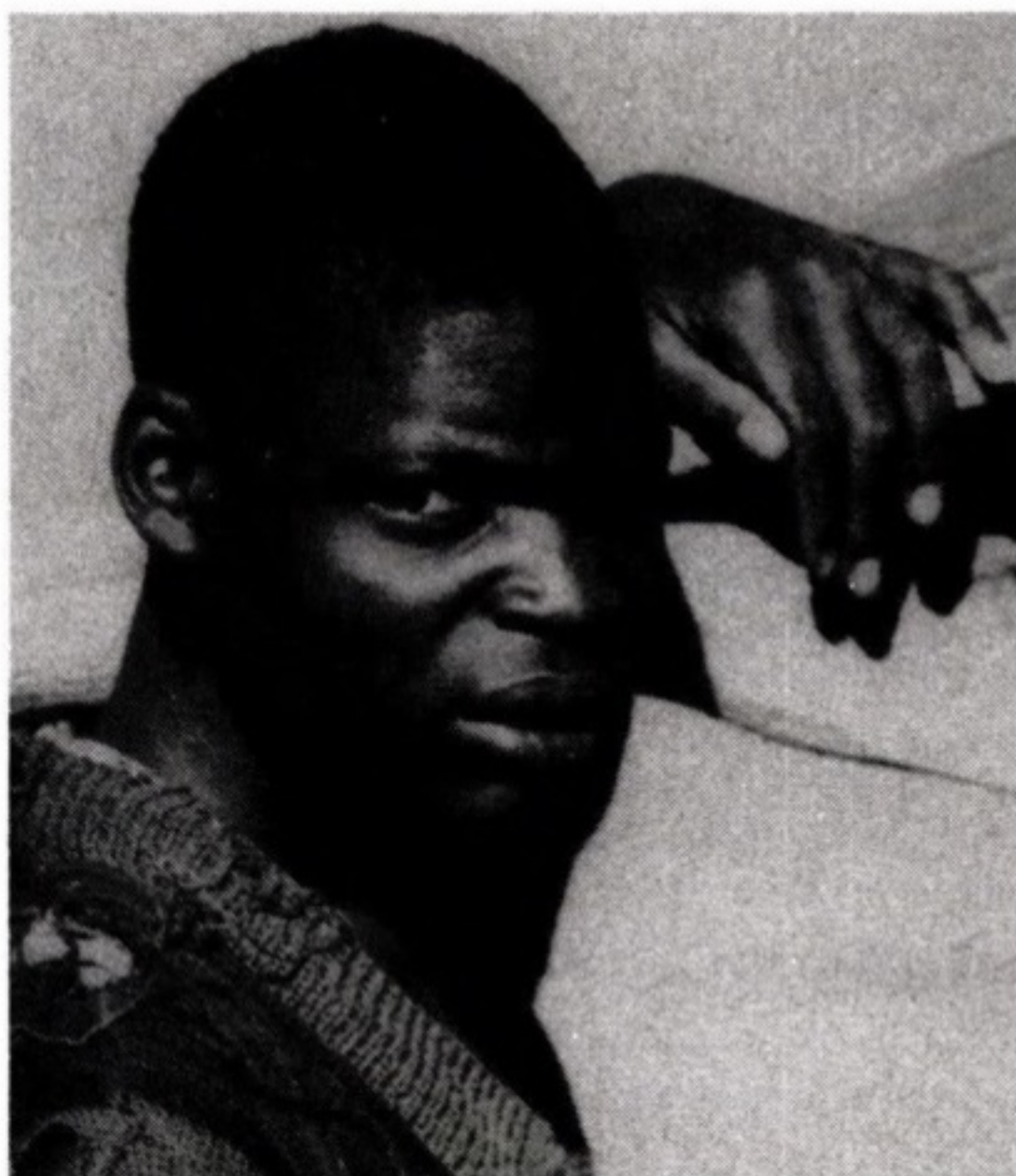
Carol Fewster

Candide by Voltaire (1694-1778)

Malawi



Photo: FAO



Leader Life President Dr Kamuzu Hastings Banda

Economy GNP per capital \$170 (US \$19,840)

Monetary unit: Malawian kwacha

Without mineral resources or factories, Malawi has long served as a cheap labour pool for the industrialized regions of Southern Africa. Many commercial farmworkers in Zimbabwe are of Malawian extraction, but prevented by poverty from returning home. Peasant farming is the country's mainstay but plantation cash crops like tobacco offer rich rewards to the wealthy. Main exports are tobacco and tea; main imports are fuel, machinery, processed foodstuffs.

People 8 million

Health Infant mortality 149 per 1,000 live births (US 10 per 1,000)

AIDS is widespread but not officially acknowledged by the government.

Culture The majority are chiChewa speaking, matrilineal people in the centre; the minority are chiTumbuka speaking, patrilineal and live in the North. Nyanja, Lomwe and Yao in South.

Religion: Traditional ancestral beliefs, cults and secret societies co-exist with Christianity.

Languages: chiChewa and English.

Sources: World Bank Report 1990 and information supplied by the author.

Last profiled in June 1981

A FEW things have changed in this beautiful country since the NI's last profile, but not its leader. Life President Banda lives on and the people respectfully await his demise.

The economic boom of the 1970s is over, but so is their political terror. Though the press still fawns, and the police, the Party and the 'Young Pioneers' still wield their truncheons, the atmosphere is easing. The succession is likely to be awkward, as the main contender for power is unscrupulous and unpopular.

'An independent Scotland would have had one colony - Malawi,' wrote a Malawian historian. Scottish missionaries called it Lakeland (Nyasaland) and educated a critical, confident intelligentsia which in the 1950s led African resistance to the white settler-led Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland. But out of Lakeland was born the Land of Fire (Malawi) where political criticism has never been tolerated since Independence, and power and wealth are concentrated among white estate owners and a few

senior government personnel. Banda's own company, Press Holdings, controls almost half the economy, from supermarkets to processing and packaging firms.

Malawi is a visitor's paradise: 'the warm heart of Africa' has good roads, beautiful craftwork and polite officials. Lake Malawi's beaches are one of the places where white South Africans can go to meet their international peers.

Yet the warm heart bleeds. Though the climate is kind and the people industrious, farming every spare inch of tillable land, malnutrition is rife and infant mortality among the highest in the world. Health and education are not priorities for government spending: pomp, palaces and prestige buildings are.

Low education levels and low wages are meant to keep people on the land. Migration to South Africa has been discouraged for the same reason. But the land is being privatized for tobacco estates to provide the Big Men with financial security.

War in Mozambique is forcing thousands across the border into Malawi's over-crowded refugee camps, where international relief programmes further skew the tiny local economy. At present, Malawi hosts almost a million refugees.

Though still dependent on South Africa, Malawi has recently improved relations with Mozambique and Tanzania - its 'socialist' neighbours - in preparation for the impending changes in South Africa.

The new capital, Lilongwe, however remains an ugly monument to apartheid city planning. Its space-age downtown offices and shopping malls are miles from black residential areas - but handily close to the bungalows of the aid and diplomatic brigades.

Maggie Sinclair

At a glance

***** Excellent
 **** Good
 *** Fair
 ** Poor
 * Appalling

INCOME DISTRIBUTION

* Wide gap between poor and rich

1981: *

SELF-RELIANCE

** Dependent on world commodity prices

1981: ***

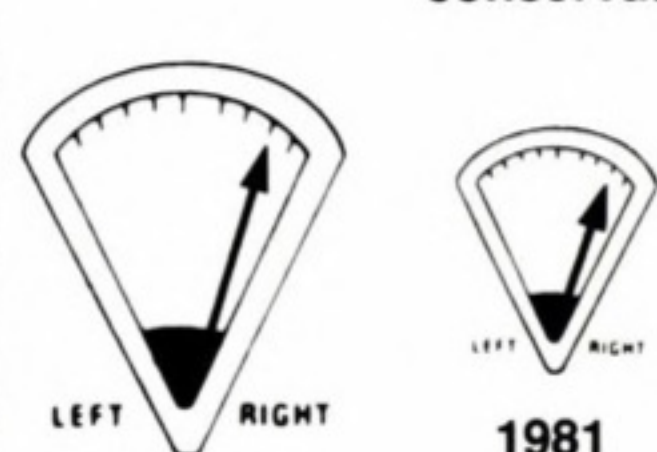
POSITION OF WOMEN

*** Traditionally strong; little violence against them

1981: ***

POLITICS

Autocratic conservative



1981

LITERACY

** 41 %. Tiny education budget

1981: **

FREEDOM

** Many political exiles and prisoners. Censorship; informers; opposition stifled

1981: **

LIFE EXPECTANCY

* 47 years. One of the world's lowest. Low health budget; malnutrition

1981: *



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